

Just Published.

Price 7/- Net.

AT ALL LIBRARIES
AND BOOKSTALLS.

A STRIKING NEW NOVEL

ENTITLED

THE

BEAUTY-KILLER

By BRANDON FLEMING

THE Story centres round the unravelling of a series of mysterious crimes which, having baffled all attempts at solution, at length roused to effort one of the most interesting exponents of detective work.

Incidentally it also gives a deeply absorbing presentation of one of the social problems surrounding certain attributes of heredity which have long formed the life study of many of our greatest brain specialists.

London :

F. V. WHITE & Co., LTD.,
17 BUCKINGHAM STREET, STRAND, W.C.

THE OTHER PERSON

THE OTHER PERSON

BY
FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF
"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB,"
"THE TOP DOG,"
"ACROSS THE FOOTLIGHTS,"
"ANSWERED,"
ETC., ETC.

LONDON :
F. V. WHITE & CO., LTD.,
17, BUCKINGHAM STREET, STRAND, W.C.

1920

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I—THE SCANDAL SHOP	I
II—TRUE LOVE	16
III—FALSE LOVE	31
IV—NECROMANCY	45
V—LOVE OR MONEY?	60
VI—EXILE	75
VII—A SOLEMN WARNING	90
VIII—THE VICAR'S DECISION	105
IX—MR. FELK.	120
X—SARAH JUNDY'S NEWS	135
XI—AFTERWARDS	150
XII—SUSPICIONS	165
XIII—THE MISCHIEF MAKER	180
XIV—HIXON	195

CONTENTS

CHAP	PAGE
XV—LARCHER'S STORY . . .	209
XVI—THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS . .	223
XVII—ANOTHER SENSATION . . .	238
XVIII—MOTHER CORN	252
XIX—THE SCHEME	267
XX—THE TRUTH	282
XXI—THE CLOUDS DISPERSE . . .	297

The Other Person.

CHAPTER I

THE SCANDAL SHOP

Mrs. BANKS was one of those aggravating people who, having seen better days, constantly recall the brief period of glory. On the death of the head clerk in a lawyer's office who enjoyed the doubtful felicity of calling himself her husband, she returned to her native village with no money and two small children. Here Mrs. Banks lived for many years, dependent upon her bachelor brother, the Wichley grocer, and when he died she inherited the business. As the shop was well patronized, and was also the post office, the widow lived very comfortably. Yet she was never satisfied, and passed the greater part of her time in whimpering, while her daughter, Dolly, attended to the customers, and her son, Bob, took round the parcels. The children, though still in their teens, were brisk and businesslike young persons, who were shrewd enough to value the competence left to them by their uncle. They did everything, while their mother did nothing. It was difficult for them to keep the fifth commandment ; but on the whole they obeyed it fairly well.

The shop was a dingy little hole, crowded with goods, and its low ceiling was decorated with fitches of bacon, strings of onions, bootlaces, brushes, tinware, shoes, and such-like merchandise. On the tin-covered counter and in the window cheap sweets were attractively arranged, interspersed with dolls and toys, picture-books, and gaily-tinted boxes of biscuits. Also

near the paraffin lamp which illuminated the shop when necessary was a huge cheese, a jar of golden syrup, and a pile of newspapers, old and new. A barrel of grain stood here, a cask of flour stood there, and the floor was so piled with things to sell that there was only a narrow passage from the door to the counter for the convenience of customers. These stepped down from the street into the shop, as if they were descending into a dungeon, and the twilight within made them stumble after the sunshine without. It was not an attractive shop, nor did the mixed smell of coffee, onions, and paraffin improve it. But Mrs. Baltin, who owned the village, would permit no other grocery to be established in Wichley, so the inhabitants had to put up with this antiquated mart as best they could. The lady of the manor was their Czar, and they were compelled to obey her.

Mrs. Banks should have been out in the bright June sunshine, breathing the fresh air and admiring the flowers. But these delights, as she observed, were not for her, though why this should be the case no one knew save herself, and she did not vouchsafe an explanation. For some unknown reason she preferred to sit over an unnecessary fire in the gloomy back-parlour of the shop—which she called the drawing-room—drinking tea and complaining of her woes. Her tall, lean figure was clothed in black. She wore a jet chain round her neck, a jet brooch, jet earrings, and jet bracelets. Both dress and ornaments were as dark as a December midnight, and the lachrymose expression on her pinched countenance was correspondingly sad. The woman was one of those who hugged grief, who enjoyed grief, who loved to be miserable, because in some paradoxical way being miserable made her happy. She was reading a story by Garvice, and his account of doings in high circles should have made her content

for the moment. But it did not. She complained that the author in question took much too cheerful a view of life.

"He should remember that we are all worms," moaned Mrs. Banks, wiping a tear from her left eye with a black-bordered handkerchief. "Dukes, duchesses, kings, labourers, chauffeurs, actresses, we are nothing but dust and ashes."

"Some worms have a good time," said Dolly agreeably, for she was much too healthy a girl to be dismal.

"Not here," retorted Mrs. Banks, shaking her head. "In Camden Town, where I lived as a bride, things were different, I grant. Then all was gaiety, orange blossoms, theatres, concerts, and merry working-parties at the rector's abode. I was joyous then."

"I wish you would be joyous now, mother. Things might be worse, you know. After all, we are alive."

"Better if we were not, Dorothy. I long for my harp and crown."

"You can't play the harp, and a crown wouldn't suit you," said the girl, with a good-humoured shrug. "Bother! there's the bell again."

A shrill nagging tinkle summoned her to attend to a customer, and she slipped quickly into the shop, while Mrs. Banks sighed over the pert remarks of her offspring and cast a sad look round the room. The sight was not calculated to make her feel cheerful, even if she had been disposed to behave so sensibly. Mark Tapley would have found an excellent opportunity for the exercise of his bright philosophy had he been cooped up in this airless dungeon. It was small, with one door, affording admittance to the shop, and one window, looking out on to a trim garden, to the cultivation of which Bob devoted his spare moments. The apartment was filled with unnecessary furniture,

cumbersome and ugly; while the upholstery, the carpet, the table-cloth, and the curtains were so woefully faded that the general aspect was autumnal. The sole touch of colour visible was supplied by the crimson glare of the coals in the grate. In fact, the so-called drawing-room was really a vault, and Mrs. Banks in her cheerless black garb was the ghoul who lived there. The wonder was how her children could endure such sepulchral surroundings.

Dolly was absent for quite ten minutes, and returned to lighten the room with her gay frock of blue linen trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons. She was a tall, handsome girl of the milkmaid type of beauty, with red cheeks, black eyes, dark hair, and a general bouncing appearance. In Georgian days she would have been termed "a buxom wench," and it seemed strange that so bloodless a woman as Mrs. Banks should have a daughter so full of vitality. Their dispositions were as different as their looks, for while the mother was meek and melancholy, the girl had high spirits, a greedy desire to be amused, and an ardent longing for admiration. To put the matter in a nutshell, Mrs. Banks was old, while Dolly was aggressively young, and they were about as well suited to be together as snow and fire.

"Jem Trap," explained the girl, with a frown, as she flung herself petulantly into a chair. "He came for his grandmother's tobacco. Fancy old Mother Corn smoking! Disgusting, I call it."

"Cigarettes are fashionable in high female society, I hear," remarked the widow, who was reading about dukes and earls, countesses and duchesses.

"A pipe isn't, and Mother Corn smokes a pipe. Ugh! The idea of my having a relative like that!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Banks, who quite understood, "so Jem still makes love to you?"

Dolly nodded, and stood up to survey her ripe

beauty in the dingy mirror over the fireplace. "He kept me talking, and that's why I was so long away."

"He is good-looking, Dorothy."

"Good looks aren't money. I don't want to marry a labourer and pig it with his tobacco-smelling grandmother."

"But you've encouraged Jem Trap."

"Oh, why not? He's useful at a pinch. Marriage is quite a different thing. You want me to marry a gentleman, don't you, mother?"

"Well, yes, dear, if he means honest."

"I'll make him mean honest. I can twist him round my finger."

"Jem Trap?" asked Mrs. Banks artfully, and with the idea of extracting more information.

"No! Do you call that great hulking animal a gentleman? Where are your eyes, mother?"

"In my head," retorted the widow tartly, "and they don't see Mr. Larcher making you his wife."

"Then they're short-sighted, mother, for his wife I intend to be."

Mrs. Banks sighed and shook her head. "It's too good to be true, Dorothy. We are born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards. You take after your pa, dear, for he was that fond of high society as never was. Ah well! he's dead, and, being truly good, his society's high enough now, I'll be bound. If," added Mrs. Banks, with a plaintive glance round the vault, "if Mr. Larcher will come to our happy home and beg to be my son-in-law, I shall be agreeable. But I don't think he will come."

"I'll make him," cried the determined Dolly viciously. "Chris——"

"You call him Christopher?" exclaimed the widow, startled by this intimacy.

"I call him Chris," retorted the girl with some tartness. "For the last two years I have called him so, and I intend to go on calling. He has paid me attentions, and he has kissed me."

"You shouldn't have allowed him to do that, Dorothy."

"Oh, yes, I should. I know how to look after myself, none better, even though I'm only nineteen years of age. Chris is a fool, and I'm clever."

"Many girls have talked in the same confident way, Dorothy," warned Mrs. Banks solemnly, "and have met with disaster."

"Oh, don't preach. You belong to the past generation, and don't know how to manage things."

Naturally Mrs. Banks was annoyed by this allusion to her age. "If you are a sample of the present generation, Dorothy," she said scathingly, "I am glad that I belong to the happy past. But as your mother——"

"As my mother you have only got to sit in that chair and read novels. Bob and I will look after things."

"Oh dear me no," was Mrs. Banks' offended reply, and she drew up her spare figure stiffly. "*I believe* this shop does belong to me on lease from Mrs. Baltin, and the goods in it, *I believe*, were left to me by my late brother, who is now in glory, having passed away from earth like the smoke that perisheth."

"Well, well, well!" said Dolly impatiently, "and what then?"

"This, Dorothy. That if we offend Mrs. Baltin she may do away with my lease; and offend her we will if you try to marry Mr. Larcher."

"I don't see that, mother."

"I do, being of a reflective disposition. Mr. Larcher is Mrs. Baltin's nephew, and she owns the whole village

of Wichley. The leases are so worded that she can turn any one out in six months after notice has been given. And notice to me she will give, Dorothy, if you insist upon becoming Mrs. Larcher. Not that you ever will be, for to my mind he favours Miss Alice Dene, the daughter of our respected vicar."

Dolly jumped up in a towering rage. "That girl!" she screamed. "Why, she has a complexion like a ghost, and is as washed-out as anything."

"She is a refined lady, Dorothy, which you ain't, and her looks are those of a pure white lily."

"I'll lily her if she crosses my path!" was the angry reply. "And you needn't bother your head, mother. I know that he has flirted with Miss Dene just to keep his hand in."

"He's flirted with every one, if you are talking of Mr. Larcher," said Mrs. Banks grimly. "He's a bad young man."

"Of course I'm talking of Chris, and he isn't bad—only silly and conceited. I intend to marry him because he's his aunt's heir, and when she dies we shall have the whole village to ourselves. After all, Chris is only a veterinary surgeon."

"And a very nice and agreeable occupation it is to be one. Much harder than being a human doctor, to my mind, as persons can tell their aches and pains, while we know animals are dumb things. Mr. Larcher is better employed in looking after horses, dogs, cats, and calves than running wild as he did for years until Miss Hesmond took him in hand. She's been the making of him, and if you marry him, Dorothy, you'll be the undoing of him. His aunt won't leave him a penny if he marries you, and she'll turn me out. No, no, my child. It is better to stand aside and allow Mr. Larcher to make Miss Dene his wife."

"I shan't, then," said Dolly angrily and with a stamp. "I love him, and I want to be a lady——"

"You'll never be that last," interrupted her mother. "Humble you were born, and humble you'll remain."

"I don't think so, whatever you may think," snapped the girl, wincing at this plain speaking, for she was entirely composed of vanity and aspiration. "And as to Chris marrying that thread-paper Miss Dene, her pa will stop that."

"Why should he, seeing that Mr. Larcher will own the whole village when his aunt goes to join my husband and your uncle?"

"Because the vicar doesn't approve of Mrs. Baltin's triflings with spiritualism," retorted Dolly coolly. "You know how she's taken up with Dr. Pess, and how they have devils from the other world round them every night."

"Don't, child! You make my blood run cold."

Mrs. Banks shivered, and turned a leaden colour, for she had heard the rumours in question.

"If you were in Mrs. Baltin's house after nine, mother, your blood would turn a deal colder," said the girl mysteriously. "Dr. Pess and she tap on tables and set all the furniture dancing like anything. They call people out of their graves, and ask questions as to what will become of *them* when *they* die."

"It's easy to answer that question," said Mrs. Banks with gusto. "They'll go to the bad place to gnash their teeth and wail."

"Mrs. Baltin hasn't got teeth to gnash, except her false set; and as to wailing, she's not the kind of lady to cry out. But what you say, the vicar says. He is dead-set against these wicked doings, so it ain't likely as he'll allow his daughter to marry Chris."

"Well, there's some sense in that," assented Mrs. Banks thoughtfully. "And Miss Dene has always obeyed her parents, which is more than I can say for you, my wilful child."

"She's only got one parent," said Dolly, with a shrug. "Her mother's dead and buried. Anyhow, you can see that I needn't fear Miss Dene as a rival. Now it stands to reason that, failing her, Chris will marry me."

"I shouldn't be content to be picked up in that way, Dorothy."

"I'm not picked up! He loved me first, and he'll go on loving me as long as I choose. So there!"

"Well," said Mrs. Banks, with a weary sigh, "it's no use my talking. You are one of those, Dorothy, who teach their grandmother to suck eggs. Go your own way, and much you'll make of it. For my part, I only wish to be left in peace, keeping my lease and my shop, as will keep me, until I lay my bones beside the dead. And there's the bell," she ended tartly, "so, as you're not a lady yet, perhaps you'll attend to the customers."

Long before the dismal old woman finished Dorothy was out of the vault and smiling on Miss Hesmond, who wanted to buy stamps. The spinster was a stout, squarely-built person, plain-looking and plain in her dress. Both cut and material were old-fashioned, as Miss Hesmond was by no means an up-to-date lady. She wore a voluminous skirt of brown moire-antique, with a bead-trimmed cloak of black velvet and a bonnet which might have come out of the ark. As she had dressed sixty years ago so did she dress now, and as she was slightly over eighty she was accepted as a tradition in the village wherein she had lived throughout her long life. She certainly did not look her age, as, in spite of her white hair,

she had a rosy face, astonishingly free from wrinkles, and two piercing grey eyes which saw everything. If Miss Hesmond's tongue had been as sharp as her eyes, the inhabitants of Wichley would have fared ill at her hands, seeing that she knew something about every one. But being a kindly old body, who ignored the worse and invariably spoke the best she could of this person and that, her neighbours escaped criticism. Miss Hesmond, with her very small cottage and very small income, with her kindly ways and old-fashioned garb, was extremely popular, and every one who was in trouble sought her counsel. She was the mother of the village, and prided herself on the position.

"Well, Dorothy," said Miss Hesmond briskly, when the stamps were in her purse, "and how is your dear mother?"

"She is alive, Miss Hesmond, and as usual spends her time in wishing she was dead. I never did see such a Jeremiah as mother."

"It's natural, my dear. She has passed through great trouble."

"That's just it. She has been through trouble, but she isn't in it now. As she has the shop and me and Bob, I don't see why she can't be happy."

"Youth cannot see much that age can see," rebuked Miss Hesmond seriously.

"It would be a dismal world if youth did," retorted Dorothy coolly. "I daresay we are all waiting to have our eyes opened like blind puppies, but until then I mean to have a good time."

"Ah!" Miss Hesmond smiled archly. "Then the rumours I hear about you and Jem Trap are true? You are walking out together?"

"We aren't! The rumours ain't true, nohow. Jem Trap indeed!"

"He's not a bad fellow, Dorothy, and marriage would improve him greatly. All his faults are on the surface."

"If poaching and drinking and loafing are faults, they certainly are."

"Look how kind he is to his grandmother."

"Why shouldn't he be? She keeps him."

"Look on his best side, Dorothy. Think how your influence could be used for his good."

"Thank you, Miss Hesmond; but I don't want to dry-nurse a hulking lout like Jem. I want a smart husband who is a gentleman."

"I have heard rumours of that also, Dorothy," said Miss Hesmond dryly; "but I do not think it would be at all suitable."

"Why not? Mr. Larcher loves me."

"It is you who have mentioned the name, not I, Dorothy. But now you *have* mentioned it I may as well inform you that Mr. Larcher's affections are set elsewhere. You understand?"

"Yes, I understand, and she shan't get him. And what's more, her father will never consent to her marrying the nephew of a lady who makes friends with devils of the pit."

"Hush! You mustn't talk of Mrs. Baltin in that way."

"She talks of me in a much nastier way," said the girl sullenly. "Because Chris—I mean Mr. Larcher likes me, she says all sorts of things, because she is afraid that he'll marry me."

"He won't marry you," said Miss Hesmond sharply, "and it is foolish of you to cherish such a silly idea. I don't believe in people marrying out of their sphere. Get a husband in your own rank of life, Dorothy."

"Jem Trap for instance," suggested Miss Banks tauntingly.

"You might do worse," said the old spinster, always tolerant. "Jem has many good qualities, and you can make a man of him."

"I daresay. But aren't we talking in a circle?"

Miss Hesmond smiled. She never lost her temper, as she considered people who talked impertinently to be nothing but children. "We are, I think; and, after all, your marriage is none of my business. I ask your pardon for speaking."

"Oh, don't say that!" Dorothy felt ashamed, which was exactly what Miss Hesmond wished her to feel. "You are always kind and good-natured. I'm not such a bad girl as people say."

"I never heard a single person say that you were a bad girl," said Miss Hesmond emphatically. "You are only young and inexperienced. Hush!" She glanced towards the brilliant oblong of sunshine which was so visible in the darkness of the shop. "Say no more. Here is Miss Dene."

Dorothy scowled, and turned to get something that was not wanted from the shelves behind the counter, while the vicar's daughter stepped into the shop. She was a slender, pale girl, pretty, delicate, and retiring. Like every one else, she loved Miss Hesmond, and her rather sad face lighted up when she saw the mother of the village.

"How are you, Miss Hesmond?" she said, shaking hands. "I intended to call and see you on my way home."

"It's lucky you didn't, Alice, or you would have found me out. I have to go on from here to see Dr. Pess about that child of Durley's who is ill. Poor little dear, it fell into the fire and burnt itself; or, rather, I should call her 'she,' as she is a girl. How one falls into the habits of talking of children as 'it'!"

"I might have guessed that you were going about

doing good," said Alice, pressing the hand she still held. "I'll walk with you part of the way. But I won't see Dr. Pess. I don't like him."

"Hush!" said Miss Hesmond, glancing towards Dorothy, who was all ears.

"Oh, don't mind me," cried Miss Banks with pretended indifference. "Every one knows that Dr. Pess isn't everybody's money."

"Dorothy, he is a clever doctor and a good man."

"Clever? Yes, Miss Hesmond. Good? Hum! People who know devils ain't good."

"Don't talk such nonsense, Dorothy," said Alice in sharp tones, for she was more alive to the girl's faults than Miss Hesmond was. "People who go in for table-turning are not so evil as your ignorance thinks."

"I don't say that Mrs. Baltin is evil——"

"We are not speaking of Mrs. Baltin," interposed Alice, with a flush.

"I am," said Miss Banks coolly. "She's a table-turner also, and just as much a witch as is old Mother Corn."

"Who says that Mrs. Corn is a witch?" asked Miss Hesmond hastily, for she saw that the two girls were hostile to one another, and knew the cause of such hostility.

"She says so herself, and is proud of being a witch."

"There are no such things as witches," cried Miss Dene contemptuously.

"Well, then, you don't read your Bible, for that's full of witches," returned the undaunted Dorothy; "and Mother Corn is a witch. She told my fortune. I'm to marry a gentleman." And she looked straightly at Alice.

The girl knew quite well what she meant, as Larcher's philandering with this forward young person had

reached her ears. But Miss Dene was not foolish enough or undignified enough to take up the challenge, so she abruptly changed the subject. "I want some tape, please, and three packets of pins."

After giving the order Miss Dene turned away from the counter, and while Dorothy was getting the articles she spoke quietly to Miss Hesmond. "Have you seen Chris lately?" she asked, but loud enough for Dorothy to hear, although she did not do so intentionally.

"Yesterday," said the old maid genially. "He is getting on nicely in his profession, and is very popular. But, indeed, why shouldn't Christopher be popular? He is young and clever and kind-hearted."

"I wish my father thought so," sighed Alice. "He calls him a scamp."

"Oh, that's all done with," said Miss Hesmond hastily. "Christopher was certainly a trifle wild, but now he is all that the most exacting parson can desire."

"I wish my father thought so," sighed Miss Dene again, "but he doesn't. Chris and I have to meet by stealth."

"Oh, my dear, that isn't right."

"We can't help it. I love Chris, and he loves me!"

Dorothy, who was now packing the wares asked for by her rival, nearly burst out into a denial when she overheard this statement. But she did not do so lest Miss Hesmond, for whom she had a great respect, should interfere. Therefore, with burning cheeks and eyes which sparkled angrily, she bent over the counter, straining her ears to hear more. She *did* hear more, and obtained information which annoyed her beyond measure.

"I am to meet Chris this very evening in the porch of the church," said Alice, sinking her voice and

looking round cautiously, "at eight o'clock, after dinner, when father is in his study."

"You shouldn't," urged Miss Hesmond, much distressed.

"I should, and I'm going to. Thank you, Dorothy."

Alice took the packet and gave Miss Banks the money. "Come, and I'll tell you all about it."

The old maid and the young one left the shop, while Dorothy made up her mind to be the inconvenient third at the lovers' meeting.

CHAPTER II

TRUE LOVE

WICHLEY was a rather uncommon village, and might be personified as an ancient grand-dame in the midst of noisy children. It was placed on the extreme verge of London, in that neighbourhood where the great city stretches into Essex. On three sides the quaint little hamlet was surrounded by bustling suburbs, but the fourth side was open to the country. The Baltin family had owned it for centuries, and, being a markedly conservative race, always objected to any change being made. The one main street and the few minor streets were as narrow and crooked now as they had been in the past, with cobble-stone pavements and open drains. The many cottages were primitive, with whitewashed walls and thatched roofs, and the better-class houses of mellow red brick dated from early Georgian times. The Manor House itself was of Tudor architecture, built of grey stone, and draped with darkly-green ivy. It stood at one end of the village, while the square-towered Norman church, with the vicarage beside it, stood at the other end. Therefore Wichley was well protected by the squire—if Mrs. Baltin can be called so—and the parson. No modern improvements were likely to spoil the picturesque beauty of the past while they held sway.

Not that the vicar had much to do with the matter, save as a supporter of the lady of the manor. Mrs. Baltin was quite a despot in her own narrow way, and ruled her small kingdom with a firm hand. She never granted long leases, and thus was able to turn out any recalcitrant tenant within a few months

if he or she proved refractory. Under this system there was no room for the exercise of ambition in Wichley, unless the ambitious person wished to leave the place. The rents were moderate, there was ample work for labourers in the surrounding suburbs and in the country, and on the whole Wichley was a prosperous community. But it was woefully behind the times, as there was no gas, no supply of water, no amusements, and no modernity whatsoever. The suburbs, only a stone-throw away, resounded with the roar and bustle of the twentieth century, but Wichley remained placid with the peace of two hundred years ago. It certainly was unique, and some people, worn out with the struggles of life, preferred its calm atmosphere to the tumult of up-to-date civilization. Mrs. Baltin could have realized an immense fortune had she sold the land to enterprising jerry-builders and hot-headed speculators. But she refused to yield to the spirit of the age, and continued to reign as a minor Czar on her modest two thousand a year. What Christopher Larcher would do when he entered into his kingdom it was hard to say.

Christopher was his aunt's heir, as he was the son of the late squire's sister, and an orphan, whom the old lady had looked after for many years. She liked Christopher, who was handsome and light-hearted, so she had done her duty by him faithfully. The lad went to Winchester and afterwards to Cambridge, returning home to act as Mrs. Baltin's right hand in the management of the estate. Unfortunately Christopher was of a pleasure-loving nature, and did not care for hard work or for the precise ways of the old dame. And it must be acknowledged that, being an autocrat, she governed rather sternly, so that in time the high-spirited young man kicked over the traces. He became wild and—as people said—

profligate ; but it was simply the exuberant spirits of a young bull in a flowery meadow. There was no vice in Christopher to speak of, as he was kind-hearted and well bred. But, naturally, at his age he could not think the thoughts that Mrs. Baltin thought or act as she acted. Being of a serious nature and without the slightest spice of humour, she took a narrow view of his conduct. Constant lectures, constant reproofs, and constant threats to disinherit him made Larcher wilder than ever, as, with the natural impetuosity of youth, he disliked being dictated to. By the time he was twenty-four there was every chance that Mrs. Baltin would turn him out of doors.

From this fate the young man was saved by Miss Hesmond. That wise old maid, who had known Christopher from the time he was a very small boy, asked him to tea, talked to him quietly, humoured his prejudices skilfully, and made suggestions which she led him to believe were his own. Like all clever women who use their sex to control, Miss Hesmond was quite capable of managing the boy, and silently acquired so much influence over him that he became as wax in her hands. Before she devoted herself to him Larcher was a child ; under her clever tuition he began to grow up, and gradually saw that the time had come for him to behave like a responsible human being. Mrs. Baltin would never have achieved this miracle, because she tried to break the lad's nature and not to bend it. But Miss Hesmond, using her long experience of humanity and her keen sense of humour, managed to bring Christopher into some sort of order. And as soon as she got him thus far she suggested work.

Larcher was by no means indisposed to try work. His mind was active, and he had clever brains, therefore the loafing life he had hitherto led began to grow very

tiresome. He had done most things and seen many, so time was now hanging heavily on his hands, and the old maid's suggestion of regular employment appealed to him greatly. The difficulty was to find out what suited him. He had no legal instincts, therefore law was out of the question. In this age of machinery he did not care for machinery, so it was useless for him to take up the profession of an engineer. The Army, the Navy, the Church, and the stage were not to his liking, and Miss Hesmond was at her wits' end to suggest agreeable employment. Finally, knowing that Christopher loved animals and understood them much better than he did many human beings, she hinted that he might become a veterinary surgeon. Larcher took to the idea at once. Mrs. Baltin rather objected to her nephew's idea, as she held the old-fashioned view that such a profession was not gentlemanly. But when Miss Hesmond pointed out that it was better that the young man should do some work rather than none at all, the lady of the manor gave way gracefully. Christopher went to the Veterinary Surgeon College at Camden Town, and worked hard for four years, supported loyally by Miss Hesmond. That mentor encouraged him, guided him, warned him, and generally conducted his life until he became qualified. Then she told him that he must no longer be a sweet pea clinging to a stick, but must become a sturdy oak, able to stand alone and face the tempests of life. It was some little time before Larcher became used to this position of independence, as hitherto he had relied first on his aunt and afterwards on Miss Hesmond. But in due time he found his feet, and the old maid rejoiced to see her protégé take his place in the ranks of the world's fighters. It was a great triumph

It must not be thought that Christopher became an

angel all at once. There was still a great deal of the old Adam in his nature, and he admired this girl and that with hot-headed impetuosity. But the hard study which he had undertaken to fit himself for his noble profession sobered him greatly, and when he was thirty years of age he began to think of devoting himself to one girl rather than court the many. Alice Dene came home from school about this time, and with Alice Dene Christopher fell promptly in love. And on this occasion it was really and truly love, not the evanescent passions which he had felt for such pretty girls as Dorothy Banks and those of her class. Miss Hesmond rejoiced, as she loved Alice herself, and knew that the sedate nature of the vicar's daughter would be used for good in connection with this gay young man. Therefore she encouraged the wooing, and proved herself to be a veritable match-maker. Christopher, now having an object in life, worked harder than ever, and established a good connection in the country and in the surrounding suburbs. Everything promised well, until Mr. Dene interfered and objected to his daughter becoming Larcher's wife. And his objection was based upon the fact that Mrs. Baltin had taken up spiritualism. This had nothing to do with Christopher, as both the young man and Miss Hesmond pointed out; but the vicar persisted, and refused to allow Larcher to enter his house. It was for this reason that Alice made the secret appointment with the young man in the church porch.

The weather was delightfully hot, much to the annoyance of those who preferred a moderate temperature. This was selfish, as for many months previously the weather had been cold. It never occurred to these grumblers that those who liked tropical climates had a right to have a few weeks of

sunshine and heat. Christopher rejoiced in the glorious warmth, and so did Alice, as she loved the south and its brilliant sun. All the day had been radiant with light and heat, with a cloudless blue sky arching over an earth rainbow-hued with flowers. The grass was dry and brown, the trees were crackling with crisp heat, and even the lovers were thankful when the evening came with a cool west wind. Never was there such a Romeo and Juliet night for the meeting of man and maid.

The fourteenth-century church was a gem, small but perfect. It had formerly been the private chapel of the lords of Wichley Manor, but when Puritans destroyed the parish church the then squire at the Restoration had handed over this fane for the use of the community. It was buried amidst a grove of oaks and elms and sycamore trees; standing in the middle of a rustic graveyard, thronged with the tombs of humble people. Of course, there was the family vault of the Baltins, with a lordly structure over it, and the last of the race might have met his Dulcinea here with safety, as few people came hither so late. But the porch was just as safe, and Christopher found himself under its shelter when the clock in the tower overhead struck eight. He sat down on the bench and waited patiently, which he could afford to do, as he had his pipe with him. A man is never lonely while tobacco is at hand.

The porch was of carved wood, very old and very elaborate, with many figures of saint and angel graven in the brown cracked oak. Larcher was in evening dress, as his aunt always dined in state, and insisted that her nephew should behave with like ceremony. He was tall and slim, a fine figure of a man in his tightly-fitting garb of black. As the night was so hot he had not troubled to wear either hat or coat, so his good looks and stalwart form could be seen to advantage

in the luminous summer twilight. Christopher was very fair-haired and very fair-skinned, with a clean-shaven face, grey eyes, and clearly-cut features. He looked well bred, and had the alert, highly-strung air of a racehorse. The indefinable stamp of the public school boy and the university man was on him, so that it was little to be wondered at that all the girls in the neighbourhood admired him. They needed little encouragement to love him, and it must be admitted that up to the present Christopher had given them every chance of doing so. Young as was his face, yet there were a few lines in it which hinted at past dissipation. But now that his affections were anchored and he was leading a decent life, these were likely to disappear. He was a lover of whom any girl might be proud, and, in spite of her father's objections, Alice did not intend to give him up. She would have been far too much the patient Griselda had she done so.

Larcher in a sitting position leaned against the walls of the porch, with a pipe in his mouth and his hands clasped round his right knee. But his eyes were fixed on the line of elms, directly opposite, which divided the church from the vicarage. The house was only a short distance away, so Alice could easily slip out and come to him through the gate which led into the churchyard. It was set in a white fence, behind which grew tall white lilies and roses as red as those which Troilus gave to Cressida. Christopher could not see the gate, but his ears were on the alert to hear the well-known click of the opening and shutting. It came a few minutes after the last sound of the bell telling the hour had died away in the still air, and at once the young fellow was on his feet, with his pipe laid aside and extended arms. Along the path, across the grass and from under the shadow of the elms, Alice came flitting like a lapwing. In

a moment she was clasped to Christopher's heart, and he was murmuring all manner of sweet nothings which meant much to her, trivial though they were. In the warm night air, in the security of the porch, and in the holy silence they kissed and cooed like the doves of Paphos. As it had been a thousand and more years ago so it was now, and immortal love told anew its immortal tale while the nightingale sang. It was a very late-staying nightingale, and should have long since been gone about its business to other climes. But then, love-making *was* its business, and perhaps it had delayed its departure so as to give these fond lovers the necessary help to wooing. The bird sang, the roses bloomed, the rising moon gleamed a pale sickle in the luminous sky, and the man and the maid silently gloried in the divine moment that comes only once in this mortal life. Then earth becomes paradise.

And the paradise did not lack its necessary serpent. Unseen in the dark shadow of an oak, Dorothy watched the pair with fierce eyes and an angry face. If looks could have slain them, they would have dropped dead at the moment; but, fortunately, the watcher had no such magic power, and could only glower at them with the unholy desire of revenge in her heart. When they sat down in the porch she sat down on the dry grass under the tree, and when they spoke she strained her ears to catch every fond word. It was lucky for Christopher and Alice that Miss Banks had not a pistol in her hand. She would certainly have killed either the one or the other—perhaps the two. The girl was scarcely to be blamed, considering how primitive she was in her feelings, these rarely being under control. Also it must be confessed that Christopher had given her cause for jealousy. He had walked with her, he had talked with her, he had given her presents, and he had given her kisses. Certainly it was now

some months since he had ceased his attentions, but time was nothing to Dorothy. She loved him; he had made her love him, and she did not intend to give him up to a whey-faced minx who could not say "boo" to a goose.

Miss Banks' description of Alice—a mental one at the moment—was hardly fair. Alice was by no means whey-faced or timid. She certainly did not possess the milkmaid beauty of her buxom rival, being pale where Dorothy was rosy, and quiet when Dorothy was noisy. One girl was a lady, the other was not, so they were as different as chalk from cheese. The pale beauty of Alice, with her dark hair and dark eyes, with her finely-cut features and refined manner, was not to Dorothy's taste, whatever it might be to Larcher's. She wondered that he could see anything to admire in the vicar's daughter, and scornfully contrasted her own vigorous charms with the restful beauty of the successful girl. For Alice *was* successful. She had captured Christopher's fickle heart, and Dorothy clenched her fist and gnashed her teeth as she watched their fond embrace. It said something for her self-control that she did not then and there rush forward to denounce the man and battle with the maid. But for once her reckless nature was wise, and she waited to listen and see what advantage she could obtain from such eavesdropping. At present Dorothy could not guess what she would gain, but she fervently hoped to overhear sufficient to place some weapon in her hand. If she was fortunate enough to get such a weapon, the jealous girl determined to use it ruthlessly. She would teach this pasty-complexioned minx to leave other people's property alone.

"How long can you stay, darling?" asked Christopher, when the first fond endearments were over.

"Only for half an hour," whispered Alice, nestling

towards him as they sat on the bench. "Father is in his study writing out his sermon, but as he has nearly finished it he won't be long. I must get back to the drawing-room before he misses me."

"It is a shame that we should have to meet like this," grumbled the lover.

Alice glanced out into the lovely night where the trees were sleeping and the nightingale was singing. Then she laughed softly. "Romeo and Juliet would have been content to meet thus."

"Oh, I'm content, dearest. But what I mean is that it is a shame your father has put his confounded foot down."

"Don't be too hard on my father, Chris."

"Well, I'm only human after all, darling heart," said the young man, with a frown, "and when everything was going on all right it is hard that the vicar should suddenly cut up rough."

"It's more romantic than a prosaic wooing sanctified by agreeable parents."

This time Larcher laughed. He could not help it. "You are like Lydia Languish, my dear. However, if you prefer romance of this sort, when Montague is ranged against Capulet, you are getting exactly what you want. My aunt is as opposed to my marrying you as your father is."

"Why?" asked Alice rather indignantly and rather inconsistently.

Christopher shrugged his square shoulders. "Why? Because of this beastly spiritualism. The vicar refuses to sanction our engagement because my aunt has taken to table-turning, and she is so furious at his objection on this score that she told me not to see you or even mention you."

"And you obey her?"

"Sweetheart, would I be here if I obeyed her?"

"No, of course you wouldn't, Chris," sighed Alice, who was in his arms with her face close to his own. "But it is hard we can't arrange our own affairs without grown-up people meddling. I'm sure I don't want to say a word against my father. I am very fond of him, and he is fond of me. All the same, private feelings are not like private soldiers, and can't be ordered about. Mr. Felk is a nice man and rich, I daresay; but I don't want to marry him."

"Felk?" echoed Larcher in tones of disgust. "Is that the bounder who lives in the red-brick house near Miss Hesmond's?"

"Yes. He only came here a few months ago, so you have not met him."

"I have seen him, however. He is a bounder."

"That is unjust, Chris. Mr. Felk is a gentleman."

"Oh, I daresay," said Larcher rather ill-humouredly. "He is not bad-looking and wears decent clothes, and he can ride, as I saw him once on a rather restive horse. All the same, he is a bounder to wish to marry you when he knows that you love me."

"He doesn't know that, Chris. Father told him that my affections were disengaged," explained Alice gently.

"Then your father is telling fibs, and a person shouldn't do that when he's always burbling the ten commandments."

"Really, Chris, you do use slang."

"I'd use stronger language if your father wasn't your father," said Larcher sturdily. "You don't know what I can say when necessary."

Alice laid a slim hand over his mouth. "It isn't necessary now, sir," she said with pretty imperiousness. "Don't let us waste the precious time in talking of what doesn't matter."

"I think your marrying this Felk beast does matter."

"I'm not going to marry him. I told father I wouldn't."

"And what did he say?"

"Told me that I was to give up all idea of marrying you."

"And what did you say?"

"I held my tongue. It was the best thing that I could do."

"Well," said Christopher, with a long-drawn sigh, "I suppose it was, seeing how deucedly obstinately your father can behave when put to it. Who is Felk?"

"He is a stockbroker, and very rich."

"Hum! And your father thinks that such a match is better than with one with a veterinary surgeon who is very poor."

"No," said Alice earnestly; "I really don't think he means that. If this spiritualism hadn't come up, I don't think father would have put his foot down."

"But what on earth have my aunt's vagaries to do with me?" demanded the young man in an exasperated tone. "I can't help her silly turning of tables. It's all rubbish, anyhow."

"Father doesn't think so, Chris. He calls it necromancy."

"Does he? It's a long enough word, anyhow."

"I looked it up in the dictionary, Chris. It means divination by means of pretended communication with the dead."

"Oh, I know what the word means, dear. I can give you further information. It comes from the Greek, *nekros* and *manteia*, both meaning divination and something to do with corpses."

"Oh, don't talk of corpses in the graveyard," whispered Alice, clinging to him.

"I shall if you'll go on hugging me for safety like that. But I say it's all that confounded Pess. He has

always been a spiritualist, or a spiritist, or whatever they call themselves, and my aunt would have nothing to do with him on that account. But a year ago she was forced to call him in when she was ill, as her regular doctor had gone to France for a trip. In some way Pess got her interested in the subject, and they had a séance, or a sitting, or whatever it is. Since then my aunt has been crazy about what she calls the other sphere, and talks, through the table, to Julius Cæsar, Mary Queen of Scots, and all the rest of them—that is, she says she does. I think it's bosh myself."

"What does she gain by it?"

"The Lord knows. She got on well enough before without such things. Anyhow, she's cracked on the silly business, and I daren't contradict her, as she always gets up on her hind legs if I do."

"Of course, you are dependent upon her, Chris," said Alice timidly.

"I used to be, but I'm not now, since Miss Hesmond told me to drop being a sweet pea. I'm getting a nice practice together, and in a year I hope to be earning enough to marry you and keep you in comfort. I shan't be able to give you a palace, Alice, but you'll not be badly off."

"I'd live in a hovel with you, darling," said Alice, kissing him fondly, "only I don't want you to lose the village."

"Ah! now you are mercenary," said Larcher rather grimly. "You don't love me for myself."

"Yes, I do; and, if you like, I'll marry you now in spite of your poverty and my father's objections," said poor Alice, hurt at being misunderstood. "But you are the last of the Baltins, and you ought to have the estates."

"Well, I'll get them, won't I? My aunt certainly has the disposal of the property, but she can't leave

it away from me for very shame. Besides, we are very good friends even though I take no interest in her magic rubbish."

"But Dr. Pess? Isn't he getting too great an influence over her?"

"Why, what are you talking about, Alice?" asked the young man in surprise. "Why Pess, is one of the best fellows in the world barring his miserable superstition. I like him, and he likes me. He won't do anything to my detriment."

"You don't think that he will influence Mrs. Baltin to leave him the estate?"

"No, I don't," declared Christopher positively. "Pess has a good practice in Wichley and in the surrounding suburbs. He doesn't want money. You needn't bother your head over that, dear."

"I don't believe that Dr. Pess is so friendly with you as you think," said the girl nervously. "He told me that you were flirting with that girl in the grocer's shop."

"Oh, did he?" Christopher grew angry. "I'll screw his apoplectic neck if he talks like that. Of course I flirted with Dorothy. I flirted with every pretty girl I saw until I met you; but since then I have been quite true."

"And you will be true?" whispered Alice, fingering his necktie.

"True as the north star, you silly darling. Don't think me an angel, Alice, for I'm not one by any manner of means. I have stopped to talk with many girls, but have always gone on. I have now stopped to talk to you, and intend to stop where I am, being quite comfortable, thank you."

Before Alice could respond to the kiss with which he closed this frank speech her father's voice was heard in the distance calling to her. In quite a fright

she started to her feet and tore herself from the arms of the reluctant lover. "I must go! I must go!" she gasped, flitting out of the porch in a hurry and without a farewell embrace, which Larcher greatly missed. "There's my father. Don't follow, Chris. Good-night! Good-night!"

"But, Alice!" he called out softly.

"No, no, no!" came floating back, and then he heard the click of the gate. Alice was gone, and with her went the glory and the beauty of the night.

CHAPTER III

FALSE LOVE

As Juliet had disappeared, Romeo was obliged to seek consolation in his pipe, and resumed his seat in the porch, smoking furiously. There was no need for him to go home yet, as his aunt would probably be in the company of Pess, engaged in spirit-rapping and table-turning. After the conversation with Alice the young man felt more indignant than ever with the doctor for having infected Mrs. Baltin with his superstitions. They were the cause of the vicar's annoying behaviour with regard to the question of his daughter's engagement, and Chris could think of no way in which the reverend marplot could be pacified. It was useless to ask Mrs. Baltin to give up her traffic with the other world, as she was an obstinate and unapproachable old woman. Moreover, being obsessed by her delusion—as Chris regarded it—there was no likelihood that she would abandon the same to promote the happiness of two deserving young people. It was all vexing and hopeless, and impossible and silly, and—and—Chris could not think of words strong enough to describe the situation.

From these dismal meditations he was aroused by two loving arms being thrown round his neck, and he started in surprise, to utter the first name which came into his head. "Alice?"

"It's not Alice," said a muffled voice, suggestive of tears, and a head drooped disconsolately on his shirt-front.

It certainly was not Alice, for his arms held a much

larger and more developed girl, who was clinging to him like a limpet. Chris, after the first moment of dismay, tried to rise indignantly, but was held down firmly. "Let me go, Dorothy," he said, resisting her embrace. "What do you mean?"

"That's what I've come to ask you," sobbed Miss Banks, still clinging so closely that Chris felt he was in the grip of an octopus.

"Then let me go, you silly girl, and ask your question sensibly." And with a sudden movement he released himself abruptly, to step out immediately into the luminous night. He felt safer in the open than in the warm darkness of the porch. Besides, it seemed desecration to sit with Dorothy where he had so lately sat with Alice.

Miss Banks was on her feet in a moment and after him. "Chris," she wailed, clasping his arm, "you said kinder things to me once."

"I said nothing that the whole village mightn't hear."

"You kissed me."

"Why not? You are worth kissing."

"Then kiss me now," said Dorothy, seizing her advantage, and held up her mouth in a most tempting manner.

Chris took her chin in his hand and looked steadily into her face, which was less aggressively healthy and much more ethereal in the twilight. "You are a very foolish girl," he said calmly and deliberately. "I have flirted with you and kissed you, it is true. But you know as well as I do that nothing serious was meant. I have not wronged you in any way."

"You have stolen my heart."

"Don't be a fool!" And the young man dropped his hand from her chin to step back quickly.

"What the deuce do you mean by coming here?"

"I can go where I like, can't I?" said Miss Banks in a tart tone, as she found that Mr. Larcher was not inclined to be sentimental.

"Who denies that? But this is not the time or place for a respectable girl to be hawking about."

"Oh! Don't you call Miss Dene respectable?"

Chris gritted his teeth, for she had caught him fairly. "Leave Miss Dene out of the question," he said sharply.

"Indeed I shan't. You ought to marry me and not her."

"Marry you? My good girl, you are crazy."

"Oh, am I?" Dorothy tossed her head angrily. "I'm sane enough to make things very unpleasant for you."

"Well, go away and make things unpleasant."

"I'll tell Mrs. Baltin that you promised to marry me."

"Go and tell her."

"I'll reveal all to the vicar."

"Reveal what you like. I don't care what lies you tell."

"I'll see Miss Alice, and——"

"See Miss Alice and any one you like," interrupted Larcher coolly; "but if you think that I'm going to stand by you at the altar with a pistol at my head you are jolly well mistaken, my girl."

"You are a villain," cried Dorothy in a rage.

"Quite so. Let us agree that I am a villain, and let it stand at that."

"Chris!" she said entreatingly.

"Don't call me Chris."

"I have always done so."

"Then don't do so any longer, Miss Banks."

"Oh," with a sob, "it was Dorothy once."

"It will be Dorothy again if you behave sensibly."

Chris heaved a sigh, for the girl was really desperately trying.

"Oh, I'll behave any way you like so long as we are again what we were to one another, Chris."

"We are to one another now what we always were, and that is nothing."

"How can you say so?"

"Because I believe in telling the truth," retorted the exasperated man. "See here, Dorothy, you know perfectly well that I have only kissed you once. A man is not always master of his feelings, especially when they are aroused by a seductive little schemer such as you are. But beyond that one kiss and a few silly words I have nothing with which to reproach myself. If I really had made serious love to you, or had injured you in any way, I should not talk as I am doing. But you know quite well that you would like me to marry you in order to have a position and plenty of money. You don't know what love is."

"I know what hate is, however," raged Dorothy sullenly, as Chris put the case very truthfully, and she knew that he was not acting unjustly towards her, "and if you scorn my love you shall feel my hate."

"That's melodramatic," answered Mr. Larcher, with a yawn, "and I'm getting very tired of all this bosh. Don't you think you'd better clear out?"

"I shan't. I'll stay here all night and tell you what I think of you."

"In that case I'm off." And Chris took a few steps along the path.

Dorothy laid hold of him. "You move another step and I'll scream," she said in a vicious way. "The vicarage isn't so far away but what the vicar can't come out to see what's the matter."

Chris was nonplussed. There was no doubt that this designing girl had caught him in a trap. If she

did scream, Mr. Dene would assuredly appear, and then it would be hard for him to explain how he came to be in such a place with such a companion. And what would Alice say? The danger of the situation sharpened his wits. He compromised. "Scream if you like," he said with pretended carelessness, "but it would be wiser of you to let me see you home. On the way we can talk reasonably."

"I always talk reasonably," said the girl sulkily, and, still holding on to his arm, she submitted to be led along the path towards the churchyard gate. In a flash it came to her that if she was seen walking through the village at that comparatively late hour with Mr. Larcher, people would certainly believe that he was engaged to marry her. Then she would be able to clamour about the loss of her fair fame, and force him into matrimony. She was quite unaware that her companion was scheming also, and wished to neutralize her plot, which he shrewdly suspected.

The ill-matched couple walked along in silence, and slowly came towards the churchyard gate, which opened on to the high road. Neither spoke—Chris because he feared to commit himself to speech, and Dorothy because she did not know very well what to say. She had tried tears, she had tried rage, and had tried threats, and to all of these Larcher was quite impervious. Really it was hard even for a clever girl, as she felt herself to be, to think of a new way to break down his reserve and re-establish what she termed in her own mind their old relations.

Of course, Dorothy knew that Chris was right in his description of what few attentions he had paid to her. They were exactly the same as in his wild days he had paid to dozens of girls. A kiss, a present or so, and a few kind words—that was all. Chris had never wronged any girl, nor had he led any girl to believe

that he intended to marry her. Every woman is shrewd enough to know when a man is serious or merely playful, and Dorothy was well aware that the young gentleman by her side had never intended his compliments to be taken for gospel truths. She knew also that no harm was done, and that only a narrow-minded person could find fault with such easy-going trifling. On the whole, the case of Miss Banks was very weak, so she wanted to bolster it up by other means. If she could swear that Chris had con promised her by walking alone with her as he was doing now in the twilight, then she might hope to become Mrs. Larcher. Failing that, she stood a poor chance of gaining her heart's desire. While she was revolving these things in her mind they arrived at the gate and passed through it. When on the high road Chris spoke as he shook himself free.

"Good-night," said Chris coolly, and turned on his heel.

"You're not going to leave me?" cried Dorothy in dismay, and ran after him down the dusty white road.

"Indeed I am. It isn't healthy for my reputation to walk home with you."

"Then you've told a lie."

"I have," said Mr. Larcher shamelessly. "I would have told a dozen to get out of the trap you laid for me."

"I'll tell every one that you met me in the churchyard."

"Well, do so. I can easily tell another lie. Where are your witnesses?"

"Miss Alice saw——"

"She saw nothing," interrupted Chris sharply, and with a sinking heart, although he was wise enough to conceal his fear. "You came after she left. What the devil do you mean by bringing Miss Dene's name into the matter?"

"I'll do what I please, Mr. Larcher. You shan't marry her."

"Mind your own business," said Chris rudely. He disliked being rude to a woman, but the schemes and chatter of Miss Banks goaded him into saying what he did say.

"I'm going to. And my business is to marry you."

"Dorothy," said Christopher seriously, and stopping to face her, "you can say what you like and do what you like. You can lie and bring false witnesses, and try to get your own way by every means in your power, both honest and dishonest; but you won't get me to marry you, my girl. Be sure of that."

"It's very hard on me," said Dorothy, beginning to cry.

Her tears had no effect on Chris, who was furious at her selfishness. "It is a deuced sight harder on me," he said indignantly. "Why should you come spying into my affairs? I never wished to marry you, and—— But there"—he made a gesture of disgust—"what's the use of going over the same old ground? You know quite well that I have not behaved badly towards you."

"I don't admit that."

"No; you'll admit nothing but what suits you. Some men might be bullied, or intimidated, or cajoled by your tricks of temper; but I'm not one of those men. Go and do your worst."

"Then I'll scream," said Dorothy firmly.

Chris waved his hand, and intimated that they had arrived in the village High Street; then taking out his watch, said that it was just on nine o'clock. "You can scream yourself hoarse if you like," he said, with a shrug. "All the houses are lighted up, and yonder is the Red Horse Inn, which is crowded with people. We are not now in the churchyard, my girl."

Then Dorothy saw that he had escaped from her snares, and that by luring her away from the lonely churchyard she had lost her chance of forcing him to compromise her. Naturally she grew angry. "You beast!"

Chris laughed and turned away. "Good-night," he said, with a shrug. "I'll follow the example of Sir Peter Teazle, and leave my character in your hands."

Dorothy stood where she was, irresolutely, and watched his tall figure as it disappeared down the street. Presently it was hidden in the windings, and she aroused herself with a sigh. For the time being she had lost the game, as it was useless to scream and tell every one that Larcher had been with her in the churchyard. He would deny that such was the case, and there were no witnesses to prove the truth of her saying. Moreover, she saw very well that, whatever she might do, he certainly would never marry her, and it was foolish to risk her reputation for nothing. Failing Larcher, there was always Jem Trap to fall back on, and she had half a mind to accept Jem's addresses seriously. He was probably in the taproom of the Red Horse at this very moment, and in her anger Dorothy thought she would summon him and say what had occurred. Then if Jem fought it out with Chris and thrashed him thoroughly, she would be tolerably satisfied. However, she did not carry out this little scheme of revenge. For her own sake she did not wish Jem or any one else to know where she had been, and therefore walked home holding her peace. But all the time she was scheming and plotting how to bring Chris to his knees. At all events she had some sort of hold of him, since she knew that he had met with the vicar's daughter in the church porch, and that was something. Miss Banks would have been disagreeably surprised and annoyed had she known that Chris was at that

very moment describing his adventure to Miss Hesmond. Far from not wanting any respectable person to know of the two interviews with the two girls, Chris went to seek the counsel of the most respectable person he knew. To enlist her on his side was the sole way in which he could hope to get the better of Dorothy and her dangerous desire to marry him. If the element of true love had been present in the affair, Larcher might have pitied the girl's infatuation, and would have been more gentle with her. But he knew that she only wished to get a position and money, and did not see why he should bind himself to a woman he cared nothing for in order to satisfy her inordinate ambition.

Miss Hesmond was in her tiny drawing-room, knitting and reading alternately in her comfortable way. She was by no means surprised to see Chris, as he often came, both early and late, when he found things particularly dull at the Manor House. With a bright smile she welcomed him, and pointed to a seat. What is more, noticing that he looked gloomy, she paid him a compliment.

"You are as handsome as a picture, my dear. I feel quite flattered to have so handsome a young man paying visits to my dull house."

"Dull? You know better than to call this house dull, or yourself either. Why, you are the best company in the world, Miss Hesmond!"

"For people of my own age, perhaps; but youth draws to youth. You should be with Alice, my dear Chris."

"I have been with Alice," he said gloomily.

"You don't appear to be very cheerful over the interview."

"Well, you see, I've been with Dorothy Banks also."

"Oh!" Miss Hesmond dropped the shawl she was knitting and stared anxiously at her protégé. "Chris, surely you are not philandering with that girl?"

"No; I have put the case wrongly. Dorothy was with me."

"What do you mean? Tell me everything."

"I mean to, as I'm in a deuce of a hole, and not through my own fault." Chris said this rather ruefully, so Miss Hesmond leaned forward and patted his hand.

"My dear, tell me all and I'll help you out of your hole. Being a woman, I am capable of dealing with women. They have many tricks, with which mere men are unable to coup."

"Well, it's that girl Banks," said Chris desperately.

"Hum! I am not surprised. Chris, will you give me your word of honour that you have dealt fairly with that girl?"

"Yes," said the young man frankly. "I can safely say that I have."

"You were rather wild, you know, dear," said the old maid gravely.

"Yes; but in my worst days I was never a swine or a blighter. I have always behaved decently towards people. No woman is the worse for me. All my wickedness, Miss Hesmond, was simply high spirits."

"I know that, Chris. If you had really been a wicked young man, you would not have responded so quickly to my desire to help you."

"You have helped me no end, Miss Hesmond," said Chris gratefully. "I have been pulled out of the mud by you. But you know what other people don't know—that I was never so black as I was painted."

Miss Hesmond nodded with a bright smile, and then came to business. "Well, and what has Dorothy been doing?"

Chris related how he had met Alice in the church

porch, and was interrupted almost immediately. "I knew that the meeting was going to take place," she said quietly. "Alice told me in Mrs. Banks' shop, and I rather think that Dorothy overheard what she was saying."

"Oh," said Chris in a peculiar tone, "so that is how she knew, and followed!"

"Followed? Was Dorothy there also?"

"She overheard all that I was saying to Alice, and much good may it do her, Miss Hesmond. Then when Alice was called away by her father, Dorothy came out and made a scene."

"She would. What kind of a scene?"

Larcher described all that had taken place, and as he proceeded Miss Hesmond's face became still more serious. "I don't know if I did right," finished the young man dismally; "but, you see, Dorothy had me on toast, and I had to tell a lie to get out of the hole I was in."

"I don't approve of telling lies," said the old maid stiffly; "but you certainly were in a difficult position."

"And not through my own fault."

"Ah! there I don't agree with you. If you had not paid these foolish attentions to Dorothy, you would not have turned the girl's head. Her heart is all right, Chris," ended Miss Hesmond with emphasis, "but her head is turned. She wants to marry you and become a lady. She said as much to me in the shop. You were foolish to take any notice of her."

"Oh, I'm always foolish where a pretty girl is concerned," cried Chris, clutching what there was of his closely-cropped hair. "I don't know what it is, but I always did love beauty. Now that I have met Alice I have kept my love for beauty in check. And I've never made any girl believe that I wanted to marry her. After all, Miss Hesmond, I'm only a man."

"When you say that, you say all," said Miss Hesmond rather grimly. "You men make love and then ride away, leaving the girl to pine."

"No, no, no! I have never gone so far. A few compliments, a present or so, and—and——" Chris hesitated.

"And a few kisses," finished Miss Hesmond dryly.

"Well, I'm flesh and blood. But really and truly with regard to Dorothy I am sure she doesn't care two straws for me."

"Shall I hurt your vanity very much if I tell you that what you are saying is the truth?"

"No." Chris laughed frankly. "Bless you, I'm not vain in that way. Anyhow, my conscience is clean as regards any woman, and particularly as regards Dorothy. If she had taken me to be in earnest, and if her heart was really in the business, I would marry her. Yes, even though I don't love her, I would make her my wife. A fellow must behave decently, even though he's a bit of a fool."

Miss Hesmond nodded approvingly. "You're all right, Christopher. I know you are an honourable man, and, being such, are at the mercy of any unscrupulous girl such as Dorothy Banks truly is. Would you tell to Alice what you have told to me this evening?"

"Yes. In fact, I would rather do so. I want everything to be fair and square between Alice and myself. You can't get behind the truth."

"Well, there is no need for you to tell her. After all, Alice is a woman, and women are apt to be unjust when they are jealous. If necessary, I shall tell her, Chris. She will listen to me."

"Will you tell her to-morrow?"

"Perhaps. It may be necessary, and it may not be. Leave things in my hands."

"And Dorothy?"

"She'll say nothing for the sake of her own reputation."

"But I don't see where her reputation comes in," said Larcher restlessly. "After all, there's no harm done. Why shouldn't the whole village know that I met Alice and afterwards met Dorothy? Alice's father might cut up rough, but as he has his knife into me already I don't mind much."

"People are censorious, Chris," observed Miss Hesmond quietly, "and they always look on the worst side of things. You don't mean any harm, and you have never meant any harm. All the same, *your* reputation——"

"Oh lord, I haven't got one."

"Yes, you have, and it is rather a dangerous one, Don Juan."

"I'm not Don Juan."

"I know that, but other people don't. However, leave Dorothy to me; I'll deal with her. The fact is, Chris," said Miss Hesmond coolly, "I was in the churchyard also, and saw all that took place." She nodded towards her hat and cloak, which lay on the sofa. "I have just reached home by another and shorter way."

Chris gasped with astonishment and relief. "You are a wonderful woman!"

"Thank you," said Miss Hesmond, smiling. "Now don't worry. All is well."

"Is all well?" asked Chris rather dubiously. "After all, as you say, Miss Hesmond, people are censorious."

"Even the most censorious cannot find fault with your meeting Alice when I was present. I was just round the corner of the church. You see, when Alice told me in the grocer's shop about this appointment, I knew what people would say if any one got to know

of it. Moreover, I noticed that Dorothy was listening ; and as she had already informed me of her desire to be a lady, I knew quite well that she would be near the porch. Therefore I went myself, and was ready to step forward if necessary. It was not necessary, as Alice went back to her father, and you managed Dorothy very well."

"I rather think Dorothy managed me," said Chris ruefully. "Upon my word she made me wish to wring her neck."

"Ah! that's a way women have," said Miss Hesmond comfortably. "They certainly are aggravating when they choose. Anyhow, if Mr. Dene makes trouble I shall tell him that I was present at the interview. The same with Dorothy. She can't say a word against you, Chris, as you were being chaperoned by me."

"But you didn't follow us up the road?"

"No; I came back by a shorter way, and had just laid aside my out-of-door things when you came in. But on the road you were out of danger, so to speak."

"Well, I don't think any one saw me with the girl. The shops were closed, and the Red Horse kept its toppers in the taproom."

"Just as well," said Miss Hesmond coolly. "However, even if some one had seen you, it matters little, as I was there. Now, Chris, you leave matters in my hands. I know how to manage."

"And what am I to do?"

"Go on working at your profession, and, if you must meet Alice, come and see her here when she calls. I shall make no secret of it, and if the vicar wants to know my views on his attitude he can ask. There, that's settled."

And thoroughly settled it was. Chris went home quite light-heartedly.

CHAPTER IV

NECROMANCY

THE Manor House was a wonderful old building, which made up in depth and breadth what it lacked in height. It had an upstairs and a downstairs, with steep and pointed roofs of red tiles on its many gables, and was built in a hollow of the small park surrounding it, so that it looked like a toad pressed close to the ground. Naturally, in such a low-lying situation, and girdled by many ancient trees, it was rather damp, the more especially as it was a rambling old house, covering a large space of ground. Its grey walls were covered profusely with ivy, and the same had to be kept well trimmed so that the windows might be visible. What with the low elevation of the mansion, with the exuberant vegetation around and the curtains of ivy, it looked as though it had grown naturally like a tree. It was sinister, sullen, and secretive; the enchanted home of a wicked fairy dwelling in the midst of a magic wood. And Mrs. Baltin was the wicked fairy.

Perhaps it is wrong to call her so, for the old lady had many good points, and was not without many kind human feelings. But having always had her own way while her easy-going husband was alive, and having it still more after his death, Mrs. Baltin had gradually become more and more imperious. She expected every one to bow down to her; and every one generally did on account of her strong nature, as well as on account of her wealth and position. She was very self-centred, and considered that those about her were in the world to serve her and her only. If they

did what she wanted, and fed her exorbitant vanity by thinking and speaking and acting as she bade them, then she was fairly agreeable. But woe to the person who ventured to suggest that he or she had a right to his or her own opinions. Mrs. Baltin had no mercy on such rebels, and banished them not only from the Manor House, but from the village over which she ruled so mercilessly. She was autocratic in every sense of that unpleasant word.

Kind as she had been to her nephew, he did not get on very well with her, as she expected him to see things as she saw them. Being young and much more modern in his ideas than an old lady of seventy, naturally Chris came into frequent collision with this anachronism. He could not see her way, and she could not see his way, therefore they were about as well suited to one another as fire and gunpowder. However, Chris, by making allowance for her age, and having a sense of humour, managed to get on with her fairly well, although he remained absent from the Manor House as much as was possible. Indeed, he desired to take rooms in the village, but this Mrs. Baltin would not agree to. She said very truly that as the last of the race Christopher should live under the same roof that had sheltered his forefathers. Unwilling to offend her, because, in her own selfish way, she really was kind to him, and also being diplomatic enough not to quarrel with one who could cut him off with a shilling, Larcher remained at the Manor House. But the whole atmosphere of the dismal house depressed his light-hearted nature and irritated his nerves. On the whole, it was not a bad training for the young man, as it made him control his temper and exercise infinite patience. All the same, it was desperately trying.

A few days after the trouble with Dorothy in the churchyard, which Miss Hesmond had undertaken to

settle, Chris had one of his usual quarrels with his aunt. This time the quarrel was more serious than usual, as for the first time he expressed his disbelief in the spirits she consulted. As Mrs. Baltin was now a fanatic she was immensely displeased, and, being supported by Dr. Pess, gave her daring nephew a bad quarter of an hour. Quite a scene took place in the large and gloomy drawing-room after dinner. But there was a calm before the storm.

During this calm Mrs. Baltin was particularly cheerful and agreeable for her, as the séance of the previous night had been particularly successful, and she had been assured by some spirit with a lofty name that she was a very important person. She sat in a deep armchair, arrayed in black velvet, with point lace at her throat and wrists and a filmy lace cap on her grey hair. She twinkled with jet trimmings and with many diamonds, so that the funereal garb was relieved by numerous points of light. Mrs. Baltin was tall and stately; very erect, considering her great age, and very majestic in speech and in manner. Her face was large in every way, and constantly wore an inscrutable expression as stony as that on the countenance of the Sphinx, which she greatly resembled. Her mouth was firm, with thin lips, her nose was like the beak of a parrot, and she had two keen blue eyes which blazed like danger signals when she was angry. And very frequently they did blaze, although on this occasion they were filled with a mild light. She was a trifle lame, and walked about with a silver-headed stick, so this detail alone made her look like the bad fairy of nursery lore. Altogether, in spite of many goop qualities which were concealed by her vanity, Mrs. Baltin was a highly disagreeable old woman.

Walking to and fro with the light-trotting step of a terrier was Dr. Pess, a stout little man with a round

red face shining with good-nature. He was bald and clean-shaven, with a rather turned-up nose and twinkling brown eyes—quite an amiable-looking man, popular and agreeable on all and every occasion. No one had ever seen Pess out of temper. He was always bright and always smiling, so that his mere presence did his patients good. Consequently he had a large practice, and besides having this ingratiating personality he was really a clever doctor. In his smart evening dress Pess looked rotund and fat, rolling here and rolling there like a plump ball. He smiled incessantly, he rubbed his hands incessantly, and talked as much as Mrs. Baltin would allow him to talk. This was not very much, as the imperious old woman liked to do all the talking herself. Every one, she considered, should listen to her opinions and adopt them forthwith, only interrupting her—that is, if any one did dare to interrupt her—to say how extremely clever she was. Pess saw her faults, and found her trying. But he really wished to improve her, and really thought that he would be able to do so with the help of the spirits. So far, however, the admonitions of the spirits had failed to effect any improvement. Mrs. Baltin was just as rude and just as impossible as she had been a year previously, before she came into contact with the unseen world.

“We really ought to have a circle,” said Pess, rubbing his hands according to custom. “You are a good medium, and so am I; but we want more power. Isn’t there any one in the village likely to—eh—you know?”

“I believe that Alice Dene is a medium,” replied Mrs. Baltin in her deep, harsh voice. “She has quite the air of a clairvoyant. But her father is prejudiced, and refuses to allow her to sit. I rebuked him for his want of faith.”

“ And he—eh—you know ? ”

“ He was impertinent, so I told him to see me no more. Unfortunately he is only subject to his bishop, or I should assuredly have turned him out of the living. We want broad-minded clergymen, who will do as they are told.”

Pess, who was clever enough, rather chuckled at Mrs. Baltin's idea of what a broad-minded clergyman should be, but was too wise to contradict her. “ What about your nephew ? ”

“ He is an unbeliever. He does not dare to scoff at the truths in which we believe, but I have remarked an air of incredulity and scorn about him on a great many occasions.”

“ Ha, ha ! But don't be too hard on my friend Chris, Mrs. Baltin,” said the doctor good-naturedly. “ He is really and truly a good fellow.”

“ And why should he not be, seeing that he is my nephew ? ”

“ Yes, yes, yes ! Of course,” said Pess hurriedly. “ Good-nature runs in the family.”

“ My late husband,” continued the old lady, mollified by this agreement, “ was an angel of good-nature, though lacking in firmness. Chris's mother was also good-natured, but rather a fool, like my nephew.”

“ Pardon me, but I don't think Chris is a fool by any manner of means,” said Pess, trying to defend the absent, and forthwith paid for his temerity.

“ I say that he is,” cried Mrs. Baltin, with sparkling eyes, and striking her stick on the carpet, “ and what I say is always right. He is a fool.”

“ But young. He may improve.”

“ If Christopher does not improve by thirty—and he has now reached that age—he never will improve. He requires a sage and sensible wife to manage him as I managed his uncle.”

"Ha!" said Pess, resuming his trot hurriedly. "I understand that my young friend Chris loves Miss Dene."

"Of course you understand *that*," said the old dame with emphasis. "Did not the Friends on the other side warn me against allowing him to marry her?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Of course. But she's a nice girl—eh—you know."

"She *is* a nice girl," agreed Mrs. Baltin coldly, "but rather feeble in her body and mind. I was agreeable at one time that Christopher should make her his wife, but now I have other views for him. In the first place, I shall never allow him to marry the daughter of a narrow-minded parson like Mr. Dene, who had defied my authority; and in the second, our Friends on the other side have warned me against permitting such a marriage."

"Have you told Chris?"

"No. There is no need just now. Mr. Dene has forbidden him the house, so there is not much chance of Christopher getting his own way. I shall put my foot down when necessary."

"Ha! Hum! Ha!" Pess rubbed his plump white hands thoughtfully. "Who told you that our friend Chris was forbidden to approach the vicarage?"

"Sarah Jundy, my maid. She knows everything that goes on in Wichley, and reports to me. I have great faith in Sarah, who has been with me for thirty years."

"Is she a medium?"

"No. She is very material indeed, as I was before I came to accept the grand truths to which you have introduced me."

"There's Miss Hesmond, you know," said Pess, after a pause. "She might be induced to join our——"

"Miss Hesmond indeed!" interrupted Mrs. Baltin,

rustling her ample skirts in her indignation. "She is worse than any one. She flouts spiritism, and says that it is dangerous. In fact, from what Sarah Jundy tells me she is preaching quite a crusade against our efforts to enlighten the world. I can turn her out of her house in six months, and I shall." And Mrs. Baltin ended with a vicious snap of her mouth.

"Well, well, well!" said Pess, pacific as ever. "Let us hope that before six months she will seek the light which you and I are spreading. Then there will be no need to turn her out of the home she has occupied for over forty years. I am always in favour of gentle treatment myself."

"That is because your nature is not so strong as mine," said Mrs. Baltin, with sublime egotism. "Remember that one friend on the other side told me that I had the mind of a Cæsar and the brain of a Semiramis."

Pess wondered what difference there was between mind and brain, as they seemed to him to be one and the same. However, he dodged a reply, and suggested a new name. "Mrs. Corn, commonly called Mother Corn—eh—you know?"

"She is a witch," said Mrs. Baltin sharply. "She deals with evil spirits. Of course, you and I know that ignorant scientists do not believe in witchcraft, but it is a wicked truth for all that. Mother Corn indeed! Never shall she enter this house, or even the grounds of this house. She would pollute the atmosphere, and attract evil demons from the eighth sphere."

"Why don't you turn her out, then?"

"Because my late fool of a husband gave her a lease of her cottage until she died," said Mrs. Baltin angrily. "Do you think that I would have tolerated the old Jezebel for so long had I been able to send her away?"

She is a public danger, and would have been burned one hundred years ago. But enough, doctor." She waved her stick as if to disperse clouds. "By talking in this way we are disturbing the atmosphere, and our friends may not come when we sit. Ah! here comes Christopher. Let us have a little light conversation, and then we can hold our séance when the boy retires to bed."

The old lady spoke amiably, as her eyes softened when Larcher entered the room. He looked young and handsome and alert in his evening dress, and she was not unmoved by his entrance. In her own peculiar way she really did love Chris, and had her moments of relaxation as now. All the same, he knew well that if he dared to have an opinion of his own Mrs. Baltin would give him a very bad quarter of an hour. This he had entered to have, and was prepared to face the worst. It was necessary that he should tell his aunt that he wanted to marry Alice, and dare her to do her worst. And, after all, Chris, in spite of the hold Mrs. Baltin had over him, as his nearest relative, and one who could make him rich, was rather weary of the subjection in which he was held.

"You look thoughtful, Christopher," said Mrs. Baltin kindly, when the young man, with a nod in Pess's direction, threw himself into a chair.

"I *am* thoughtful," assented Larcher bluntly, and steeling himself for the interview. "You see, aunt, I am getting on."

"In that not very gentlemanly profession you have taken up? Well, I am glad for your sake. It at least keeps you out of mischief, although it is not a good thing for one of our family to doctor animals."

"I think my profession is a wonderful one," said Chris dryly, "and I wouldn't change it to be a king. But that is not exactly what I mean. I am getting

on in life, and wish to be married. I suppose I can speak openly before Dr. Pess? "

"Certainly," bowed the doctor; "but I shall leave the room if you desire to speak confidentially with your aunt."

"No." Mrs. Baltin waved her stick imperiously, and her eyes began to light up. "Stay here. Christopher must explain what he means."

"I have explained. I want to marry, and I have chosen my future wife."

"Indeed!" said his aunt scathingly. "And without consulting me?"

"In such a case a man should only consult himself," said Larcher sturdily.

"Ha!" Mrs. Baltin's nostrils dilated, and her eyes began to blaze, as she scented trouble. "And the future wife's name?"

"Alice Dene. You know that I love her."

"And you know that I have forbidden her father my house because he dares to doubt spiritism."

"What has that to do with me or Alice?"

"This. That as your only relative, and one who has the disposal of the family property in her own hands, I forbid you to think of marrying such a girl."

"She is the dearest girl in the world," cried Larcher hotly.

"You will find her so," replied Mrs. Baltin, with a grim smile, "if you marry her. She will cost you the family property."

"I call that downright tyranny."

"Call it what you like, the facts remain as I have stated them. You are to marry the woman I choose for you."

Christopher started to his feet, and threw prudence to the wind. "I shall do nothing of the sort," he said, coming near to his aunt and towering over her, "and I

would be less than a man if I did what you ask. I chose for myself."

"Do you forget that you are speaking to me?" demanded Mrs. Baltin furiously.

"No. I am speaking quite calmly and quite politely. You know perfectly well that I am, aunt. It is you who are losing your temper," he added injudiciously, "not I."

"I never lose anything, Christopher—not even the opportunity of rebuking the young and ignorant."

"No. I agree with you there, aunt. But you will understand that my mind is made up. Nothing shall come between Alice and myself."

"Her father has already come between you," hinted Pess nervously, and with a wish to pacify Mrs. Baltin, who was working herself up into a royal rage.

Chris turned on his well-wisher sharply. "What the deuce do I care for her father?" he said hotly. "He has no reason to refuse his consent to my marriage with Alice. I am a gentleman; I am getting on as a veterinary surgeon, and even now make a good income. As to my being wild, which people are always throwing up to me, I have reformed. No one can say a word against me."

"I can," snapped Mrs. Baltin furiously, "and I shall say it. You will give up all thought of this girl."

"Why?" asked Chris, ominously quiet.

"Because I say so. I disapprove of her father."

"Go on disapproving, but don't visit the sins of the father on the child. I must say, aunt," complained the young man plaintively, "that you are rather too hard on me and on her."

"I know what is for your good, and you don't," said Mrs. Baltin, still coldly enraged. "I won't have you marry Alice Dene. So there!"

"And if I do in spite of your prohibition?"

"Then I shall make a new will and leave the property to some one else."

"To Dr. Pess here, for instance," said Chris, with a sneer.

"No, no!" interposed Pess quickly. "I make enough for my needs. I do not want to take any money. The sacred cause of spiritism must not be soiled by the mention of hard cash. Already too much harm has been done to it in that way."

Chris looked at the red and indignant face of the little fat man, and saw that he really meant what he said. "I believe you," said Larcher briefly, and then turned to his aunt. "I don't think for very shame that you will leave the estate to any one but me," he said calmly. "I am the only one left alive who has the Baltin blood in his veins. Every one would cry out if you made so unjust a will. I do not deserve such treatment, and I decline to put up with it. You understand? I am a man, and I shall do as I choose."

"Take care, Christopher! Take care!" The old woman trembled with indignation at thus having her will questioned.

"I am taking care. What I said I intend to do I shall do. And as it is quite impossible for me to stay under the same roof with you when you treat me as a child, I shall take rooms in the village."

"Near Miss Hesmond, I suppose," said Mrs. Baltin, with quivering lips. "Doubtless she supports you in your defiance of my authority?"

"No. I have consulted no one. I have a right to act as I please in taking a wife unto myself, and all you can say or do won't make me change my mind."

"Very good!" Mrs. Baltin rose wrathfully. "Then you lose the estates. Unless you come to your senses in a week and obey me I shall make a new will."

Before Christopher could answer Pess interposed.

The little man was really and truly sorry to see what was taking place, and strove to throw oil on the troubled waters. "My dear friend Chris," he entreated, "my dear Mrs. Baltin, do listen to me. You have different opinions, but these may be reconciled if we listen to our good Friends on the other side. They will advise whether this marriage should take place or not."

"I am quite willing to hear what the spirits have to say," said Mrs. Baltin, sitting down. "I am not unreasonable."

"And you, Chris?"

"Oh"—Larcher sat down also—"just as you please. But I fear that anything your silly spirits may say won't change my determination. I don't believe in them."

At this insult Mrs. Baltin would have burst again into fury, when Pess waved his fat little hand, and went to sit in a chair in the shadow. Unruly as the old woman was, she held her peace, as she knew that the doctor was about to summon the dead to decide the question. And she was superstitious enough to feel a trifle afraid. Therefore she sat quietly waiting for developments, and did her best to calm herself into a receptive attitude. On his part Chris waited with considerable curiosity to see what would take place. He had never been present at a séance before, and what followed was new to him.

Suddenly Mrs. Baltin rose, and, crossing to where the doctor was sitting in his chair, placed before him a small mahogany table. She seated herself directly opposite to the medium, and, together with him, placed her hands lightly on the polished surface. For a few minutes there was a dead silence. Not a sound was noticeable save the soft sighing of the night wind which breathed into the drawing-room through the open casements. Chris became aware, although he

was not a sensitive person, that the atmosphere of the room was tense and strained. He felt uneasy and uncomfortable, and looked over his shoulder to see if any one was standing behind him. There was no one, and he silently laughed at his folly. All the same, the room felt quite crowded, as though it were crammed with people all watching him and the two silent figures at the table.

Then there came a series of raps, so sharp and imperative that the young man, in spite of his bravado, could not help starting and feeling afraid. As the raps came from every quarter of the room as well as from the table, it was impossible that his aunt or Pess could be making them. Mrs. Baltin glanced over to where Chris sat in the lamp-light with an expression of triumph on her face. More and more strained grew the feeling in the air, and the table began to rock like a ship at sea. Chris was tingling from head to foot, but sat quiet, although he was secretly astonished at the uncanny feeling. He began to think that there was some truth in spiritism after all, and that the two at the table were really and truly invoking the dead. It was an unholy thing to do, against which all his being revolted. He made an effort to rise, but found that he could not. So there he sat silently, while the raps echoed everywhere and the table swung easily with the steady motion of a rocking-horse. Suddenly lights began to flit about the room, and Chris's hair stood on end. He did not like this new feature of the séance. But worse was to follow in the way of blood-curdling occurrences.

Pess breathed a deep sigh. His hands fell from the table, and he leaned back in his chair to all appearance quite bereft of life. Then his lips moved, and Mrs. Baltin bent forward to listen, as did Chris. In a far-away, telephonic kind of whisper Pess spoke. It was a very uncanny voice, very soft and very hissing. Chris

felt most uncomfortable, and wanted to jump up and end all this—as he regarded it—devilry. But he could not, and sat on as frozen as any ice-bound man.

“I am here,” breathed the small thin voice through the motionless lips of the medium. “What would you ask?”

“Ought my nephew, Christopher Larcher, to marry Alice Dene?” asked Mrs. Baltin boldly and in her imperious way.

“No,” said the unearthly voice. “Sorrow would come of the marriage; and if he does not surrender his will to you, danger will come to him.”

“And if he disobeys?”

“He will be punished.”

“By me?”

“Through you, not by you. Let him beware. He is stepping into dark clouds, and can only avoid them by giving up Alice.”

Chris shook his head violently. “I shall never give up Alice,” he said softly.

“Then you must pay in pain what you would gain in joy,” said the voice in an unemotional way. “Give her up, and be wise.”

“He must give her up,” said Mrs. Baltin fiercely. “Tell me, you who know the future, shall I ever see him marry Alice?”

“No, you will never see him marry Alice.”

“Then I am content,” said the old woman triumphantly. “I shall have my own way after all. And who are you, Friend, who speak so consolingly?”

There was a long pause, and then the voice came very, very softly and with a sinister note in it: “I am—I was—Simon Grain.”

“Simon Grain?” breathed Mrs. Baltin, turning suddenly pale, and looking as terrified as she well could look. “Simon Grain? Oh, God help me!”

And with an abrupt movement she slipped slowly from her chair to faint on the carpet.

The movement broke the spell which enchained Christopher. He rose quickly, and ran forward to raise his aunt to her feet. At the same moment Pess opened his eyes, and was again his ordinary self. The séance was over.

CHAPTER V

LOVE OR MONEY?

MRS. BALTIN was soon recovered from her faint by the anxious administrations of the doctor, and retired to bed, better on the whole, but considerably shaken. Pess took his leave immediately he saw that his hostess was comfortable, but not without a protest from Christopher.

"I don't think it is right of you to encourage a person of my aunt's age in this spiritualism," he said earnestly.

"Pardon me," answered the doctor. "Spiritism is right; but I agree with you that spiritualism is wrong."

"They are one and the same thing."

"Indeed they are not," cried Pess, eager to make a convert and expound his weird views. "Spiritualism is a tampering with the other world simply out of morbid curiosity, and with a desire to know the physical future. It is a kind of fortune-telling, and I don't approve of it. But spiritism, Chris, is a serious and holy desire to learn from higher souls how to make spiritual progress."

"If you try to imitate Christ and live the Sermon on the Mount instead of talking about it, you have all the information you need as to progression."

Pess looked at him with a pitying smile. "The scanty information afforded by the Gospels may be sufficient for you, but your aunt and I and many intellectual people desire more information. We ask for bread, not for stones."

"I don't agree with you," said Larcher positively. "I don't pretend to be a saint, but—as I told Miss Hesmond—I am not so black as I am painted. If you and I do what is told us in the Bible, we need nothing more. Let us act as we are told, and when we are successful then there will be time to take another step. Your seeking is simply curiosity to know things with which you have nothing to do at this stage of your evolution."

"Dear me," said Pess ironically, "you speak quite in a scientific way. May I ask, Christopher, if you have been studying spiritual questions?"

"Since I knew Miss Hesmond I have."

"Ah! she is the blind leading the blind."

"I don't think so," said Larcher bluntly. "Anyhow, her religion is good enough for me. If I can only become as useful a person as she is, I shall be quite content. However, it is too late to discuss the ethics of the business. All I wish to say is that my aunt is too old to indulge in such uncanny doings."

"Mrs. Baltin is in perfect health," protested the doctor anxiously.

"Why did she faint, then?"

"I can't say. She never fainted before. It was something which was said through me which frightened her."

"Well, you know what you said." And Chris looked searchingly at the man to see if he was playing a part.

"No, I don't. I was simply taken possession of by a Friend from the other side for a special purpose. I am quite ignorant of what was said, and owing to Mrs. Baltin's faint I have not been able to inquire. Perhaps you can tell me all that took place?"

"It is too late to explain things," said Chris, again drawing attention to the time. "But you uttered a

name which made my aunt faint—the name of the spirit who is supposed to have talked through you.”

“There is no supposing about the matter,” said Pess angrily. “The spirit you heard using me as a medium really did enter my body and talk. But why his name should cause Mrs. Baltin to faint I don’t know.”

“The name is Simon Grain.”

“Still I am in the dark. I never heard the name before. Did the Friend add anything to account for the faint?”

“No. What the Friend, as you call him, said earlier only had to do with my desire to marry Miss Dene. That pleased my aunt, since I was forbidden to make the girl my wife. Only when the name was uttered did my aunt faint.”

Pess spread out his hands in quite a French way, and looked honestly perplexed. “Really I don’t understand, Chris. I never heard the name before, and I was unconscious when I uttered it. My body was not my own for the time being.”

“Were you playing a game, Pess? Were you acting a part?”

“No, no, no!” said the doctor earnestly. “I swear that everything which took place was genuine. Are you not now convinced of the truth of spiritism?”

“I am convinced that there is something dangerous in it,” retorted the young man disapprovingly. “Why the dickens can’t you let the dead rest quietly in their graves?”

“We do. That in the grave is only the shell.” And Pess in his desire to promulgate his creed would have gone on talking until midnight, only Chris, being tired, asked him to go. After a few more words he did, much to the young man’s relief.

Chris passed a bad night, as the events of the evening

had upset him very considerably. With regard to the séance, he dismissed that readily enough as a mere playing with fire on the part of the two people who took part in it. Such superphysical doings did not concern him, although he could not deny that he was interested in the uncanny business. But he had to deal with a more practical matter, and therefore did not waste his time in thinking of the other world and its intrusion into this one. What kept Chris awake was the knowledge that his aunt was prepared to disinherit him if he dared to make Alice his wife. And he knew her obstinate nature well enough to be sure she would keep her word, if only out of what he called "cussedness." Mrs. Baltin, whenever she came to a decision, hastily or slowly, always stood by her guns, and always refused to change her mind. This being the case, there was every chance that he and Alice would have to live on the proceeds of the veterinary surgeon practice. Personally Chris did not mind, as his love for the girl was greater than his dread of poverty. But he wished to give Alice a good position and all that she could desire in the way of luxury. Both these wishes could be gratified if he succeeded to his rightful estates.

But the decision which would make him rich or poor lay with Mrs. Baltin, and so far she was certainly determined to ruin him rather than agree to his marriage with Alice. And as Chris had no idea of giving up Alice, it seemed probable that he would lose all. He hopefully reflected that on the morrow his aunt might be more reasonable; but knowing her as he did, the hope was a very faint one. Chris wondered if Sarah Jundy could help him. She had been his aunt's confidential maid for many years, and had known him since he was a very small boy. It was possible that Sarah might influence her mistress to reconsider her resolution; and in any case Chris resolved to ask the

maid why Mrs. Baltin had fainted at the mention of the queer name uttered by the spirit using the body of Pess. Evidently there was something in Mrs. Baltin's past life connected with that name which caused her violent emotion, and this something, from the very fact that she had fainted, was unpleasant. However, Sarah Jundy knew much about the old lady's past, and she might be able to explain.

Pess, of course, swore that the name conveyed nothing to him, and insisted that he had not spoken of his own volition. Chris did not know whether to believe him or not. From his knowledge of the doctor, which extended over a good number of years, he was prepared to find the little man genuine, as he had no reason to think him to be a plotter. On the other hand, Pess, for his own ends, might have been acting a part, and might know something about Simon Grain which he knew would shake Mrs. Baltin to her soul. She certainly had been shaken, for Chris never remembered the strong-minded old woman ever having fainted before. So if Pess had uttered the name wittingly—but there! Chris turned over and tried to go to sleep, as he was getting more and more confused. With a final decision that he would question Sarah Jundy the next day, and then consult Miss Hesmond about these queer happenings, he went to sleep. The young man was quite worn out with mental worry and physical weariness.

Next morning Chris rose feeling better, and after a cold bath he dressed himself in his professional garb, which consisted of riding-breeches and a Norfolk jacket, in order to ride his rounds. Whatever private troubles he might have, it was necessary to attend to the day's work, and he was far too practical a young man to shirk his responsibilities, especially when these meant earning an income on which he could marry

Alice. In due time he came down to breakfast, and was waited on as usual by Sarah Jundy. The old woman was very fond of him, and would never allow any one but herself to attend on him at this particular meal. As Mrs. Baltin usually had her breakfast in her bedroom, she always objected to Sarah's absence. But the maid being quite as obstinate in her own way as her mistress, Sarah did not pay any attention to Mrs. Baltin's orders in this respect. And she was such a valuable servant that the imperious old dame was not foolish enough to dismiss her. And this was strange, as Mrs. Baltin was one of those dour folk ready and willing to cut off her nose and spite her face.

"How is my deary boy this morning?" asked Sarah Jundy, when Chris, fresh and smiling, youthful and particularly good-looking in his riding garb, appeared at the door of the room. "Sit down, Master Chris. I hev bacon and tomatoes for you this morning, and cherry jam, too."

"I'm ready." Chris sat down and shook out his napkin. "I have an appetite, although, to tell you the truth, Sarah, I 'idn't expect to have one after what took place last night. How is she?"

"Fractious," said Sarah Jundy, pouring out her dear boy's coffee, which she had made with her own hands in spite of the wrathful indignation of the cook. "And what can you expect when she goes on in such a silly way with them spirits? Devils, I call 'em," cried Sarah, tossing her head. "And I wish they'd carry that Pess away to the Pit of Tophet, that I do, Master Chris."

Sarah Jundy was a very small, fleshless woman, as dry as a withered reed, with a bleached look about her which reminded people of a mummy. Her face was rather like a skull, so devoid it was of padding, and her chin was as pointed as her nose. With faded blue

eyes and wisps of colourless hair, she looked very old and very withered and very witch-like. But for all her frail appearance Sarah Judy was strong and capable, and could outlast many a stronger-looking person. She was flauntantly dressed in a red gown, with a white apron and a blue ribbon at her throat. Sarah loved bright colours, perhaps because she was colourless herself, and all Mrs. Baltin's admonitions would never induce her to wear sedate black dresses, as her mistress wished her to. But, then, Sarah was a privileged person, and did much as she pleased, which astonished every one who knew what a tyrant Mrs. Baltin was. The only description which truly suited this odd little person was that she resembled a withered flower which needed a deal of watering to freshen it up. And Chris was as fond of her as Sarah was fond of Chris.

"Do eat as much as ever you can, my deary boy," urged Sarah, when Chris paused for a moment. "You was as pale as corpses last night."

"Oh, I'm first-rate this morning, Sarah. A night's rest has done me good. I am glad that my aunt is better."

"Better? If you'd heard her tongue go this morning, Master Chris, you'd say she *was* better. Dumb animals are what you hev to do with, my deary boy, and I do wish she was one of 'em."

"Sarah, you shouldn't speak of my aunt in that way."

"I'll speak as I please, Master Chris. I hev not been with her for over thirty years to bow down and worship her like a heathen. If she wants me to go, she's only got to say the word. Lord knows I hev had enough of her tantrums."

"She is trying," admitted Chris, with a healthy sigh, as he was enjoying his meal in spite of disagreeables.

"She won't let me marry Alice."

"Ho!" snorted Sarah Jundy. "She won't let you call your soul your own if you don't stand up to her as I do. You marry Miss Alice, Master Chris, and let her put that in her pipe to smoke."

"But if I do, Sarah, she'll leave all the property to some one else."

Sarah's withered face grew a deep red. "Say that again, Master Chris, will you?"

"My aunt says that if I marry Alice she will cut me off with a shilling."

"Oh, will she?" Sarah Jundy snorted again, and folded her skinny hands under her apron, standing bolt upright as she did so. "Well, she is a sinner, and there ain't no good in her, as the good Book says. There is a bee in her bonnet, I do think, and a big bumble at that. Be careful, Master Chris, for mules ain't in it with her for obstinate piggishness."

"Don't, Sarah!"

"I shall! Who's she as is only a Baltin by marriage to go and leave what ain't hers away from you as is a Baltin true-bred? She makes me ashamed of my sect, she do."

"Well, Sarah, it either means Alice or money. I can't get both while my aunt has the casting vote."

"Take Miss Alice, Master Chris, and shame the devil. The Lord forgive me as I should call her so."

"Sarah, I won't have you speak so disrespectfully of my aunt. I shall go away if you do."

"And leave your cherry jam alone? No, deary boy. There! I'm a cross-grained old cat what says more than I mean; but I don't scratch like some cats. There now," continued Sarah Jundy, anxious to prevent further reproof, "let's hev happier words, my deary boy. Talk of something lively, do. Why did she faint last night? I never knowed her go off like that before—save once."

"When was that?"

"When Mr. Grain told her what he thought of her."

Chris pushed back his chair, dropped the spoon he was thrusting into the jam-pot, and stared. "Simon Grain?" he said wonderingly.

Sarah Jundy stared also. "Lord ha' mercy, Master Chris, and what do you know of him, may I ask?"

"I know nothing, Sarah. I want you to tell me about him."

"But you know his name, deary boy. Where did you hear it?"

"Some spirit—— By the way, Sarah, do you believe in spirits?"

"I believe in angels, though I've never seen one," replied the old woman very promptly. "But they don't come to this house with that Pess and her about. It's all wickedness and sinful curiosity with the two of 'em."

"Well, whether there are spirits who communicate or not, I can't say," said Chris thoughtfully, "although what I saw last night made me believe more than I liked to. Anyhow, some spirit who spoke through Dr. Pess—at least, that is what Pess declared—said that I was not to marry Alice, and ended in saying that he was Simon Grain."

"That that there Pess was Simon Grain?"

"No, no! The spirit speaking through Dr. Pess said that he—the spirit, Sarah—was Simon Grain."

"And she fainted?"

Chris nodded. "Went down like a stone."

"Well, I don't wonder at it, deary boy. Lord, it must be true!"

"What must be true?"

"That the dead return," said Sarah Jundy, with an unhappy expression on her face, "unless that there

Pess hev learned something, and is playing Old Harry with her and her fears."

"What fears?"

"Fears as Simon Grain may say and do what he said as he'd say and do."

"Sarah, sit down and tell me all about it," commanded Chris as imperiously as his aunt, for all these hints exasperated him greatly.

"All about what?" asked the old woman doggedly, but nevertheless obeying so far as the sitting down was concerned.

"All about this Grain. Who is he?"

"'Who was he?' you mean, Master Chris. He' a devil or an angel; but don't ask me which, for I don't know."

"You would be clever if you did," said Larcher, with a shrug. "Well?"

Sarah Jundy paused a moment to collect her thoughts, then, after a warning to Chris that he should not betray her to Mrs. Baltin, she began. "Me and her, Master Chris, was born and bred in Somerset, she being the daughter of the squire and me the child of the sexton, as humble as a magpie. Miss Vrain, as she was then, took to me and made much of me, though I never became her maid till after she married your dear uncle. Anyhow, she and me was as thick as thieves, and I was more often at the Hall than at home. She was a fine, handsome young woman, and all them men were after her. She flirted with the lot, but told me as she favoured Simon Grain the most."

"And who was Simon Grain?" asked Larcher impatiently.

"He was a young gentleman of a bookish nature, with enough money to keep himself, but not enough to marry on. They said as he was a poet," went on Sarah, rubbing her nose, "and he did write rubbish

of that sort, I believe. Anyhow, he loved Miss Vrain, and she loved him—or she said she did, which is a different thing, Master Chris. I believe she'd ha' married him if her pa, the squire, hadn't lost his money. But he did through railways, and everything would hev gone if Miss Vrain hadn't married your Uncle John."

"Oh, she sacrificied herself to save her father?" asked Chris rather sceptically, for he could not think that his aunt was so self-denying.

"No, she didn't," retorted the old woman tartly. "She married your uncle because she loved her comforts. Why, when Mrs. Baltin, she grumbled like anything because your uncle helped her pa, the squire, out of his troubles. But he did, as she hadn't the hold over him then she got later."

"And Simon Grain?" demanded Chris, trying to keep Sarah to the point.

"Oh, he cut up awful, and said as she'd spoilt his life and ruined his soul. I declare he made my blood run cold when he cursed her."

"Did he curse her?"

"That he did, and in beautiful language as the Bible couldn't hold a candle to, Master Chris. He came to the wedding, and met her at the church door when she was sailing out on your uncle's arm as a wife. Oh lord, the curses! Don't ask me to defile my tongue with them, Master Chris, for I won't. But one thing he did say, and that was as he'd kill himself and come back from the other world to make her life the hell as she'd made his. Forty years ago that was," ended Sarah Jundy, with a shiver, "but I remember it as if it was yesterday. Lord, Master Chris, how he did go on, and how she defied him!"

"Did he kill himself?"

"He did. Went mad, and committed suicide by

throwing himself into a pond. Mrs. Baltin laughed and sneered when he cursed her, being a high-spirited young woman, but she turned as pale as a sheet when she heard as he'd done away with himself. From that day to this, deary boy, she's never mentioned his name, and that's forty years of silence."

"But you said that my aunt fainted when Grain told her what he thought of her."

"So she did at the church door. She sneered and laughed, and did her best to keep it up. But in the end she went down in a faint when Mr. Grain was removed swearing like a trooper. Afterwards, as I say, Master Chris, he killed himself. Then Mrs. Baltin came to live here, and ten years later I came as her maid, since my husband died and I was looking for something to keep bread and cheese in my mouth. Thirty years I hev been with your aunt, and all my life I hev known your aunt, so if there's any one hev a right to say what they think about her I'm that person."

"It's a queer story," said Chris, after a pause. "Do you think that Dr. Pess knows it?"

"I don't see how he could know, seeing as it's forty years old, and what took place happened in Somerset. There may be truth in folk coming out of their graves to talk rubbish through that there Pess. Not as I think Mr. Grain 'ud talk rubbish. He said he'd come back to do her an injury, and if you arsk me, my deary boy, he come back last night. I don't wonder as she fainted."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Chris roughly, and rose to throw his napkin on the table.

"Well, it may be, Master Chris," said Sarah Jundy doggedly, "but if she's wise she'll leave Mr. Grain quiet in his grave, and not bring him out to punish her for heartless conduct. And heartless it was,

deary boy, as she broke Mr. Grain's heart and killed him her very own self. There you are, Master Chris. Make what you like out of it, and don't keep me talking here, as I've to go up and attend to her. Oh," cried the little old woman as she left the room, "what a nice handful she is!"

Chris strolled to the casement and looked out into the sunshine as he considered what the maid had told him. The whole story was quite in keeping with Mrs. Baltin's heartless nature, as she always sacrificed every one for the sake of her own whims and fancies. Hitherto she had escaped punishment on this score; but it seemed to Chris that if she tampered with unlawful things that punishment, long delayed, might come upon her in some dreadful form. He had promised Sarah not to let Mrs. Baltin know that he knew about Simon Grain, so he could not speak openly. All the same, he decided to remain in the house and do his best to prevent the old lady from invoking the spirits. It seemed impossible that the dead man could harm his false sweetheart. All the same, Chris had an uneasy and dim feeling that his aunt was playing with fire, and with hell-fire at that. He felt very uncomfortable.

Shortly Sarah Jundy came down with a message that his aunt wished to see him. Chris swiftly mounted the stairs, after promising the maid once more to say nothing about what she had told him. Mrs. Baltin was sitting up in bed with a shawl over her shoulders and a lace cap on her head, quite prepared to receive company. Her nephew went forward to kiss her, but she waved him quickly aside in her imperious way, quite her old tyrannical self.

"No, Christopher," she said in her deep, harsh voice, "there is no need for you to play the hypocrite with me."

Chris turned a deep red. "I'm not a hypocrite," he blurted out indignantly.

"That he ain't, deary boy," murmured Sarah Jundy from the doorway.

"Sarah, leave the room!" commanded Mrs. Baltin fiercely.

"Oh, I'll go, Miss Agnes. But say this I will, that if you ain't kind to your own flesh and blood—by marriage, that is," said Sarah with emphasis, "you ain't the Christian as you pretends to be—poor Christian as you are." And with a toss of her head the maid left the room as ordered.

"Insolent creature!" said Mrs. Baltin, with a frown. "I shall have to dismiss her before long. Well, Christopher," she addressed her nephew insolently, "are you still the fool you were last night?"

"I am still determined to marry Alice, if that is what you mean," said Chris, looking at her steadily with his grey eyes.

"I do mean that. I have sent for you to hear you say that you will obey me."

"Not as regards my marriage, aunt."

"You try to kiss me, and pretend that you love me, yet you disobey me. Do you wonder that I call you a hypocrite?"

"Yes, I do. You ask too much," said the young man bluntly.

"Very good, Christopher. Now listen to me. You decline to obey me, and last night you said that you would leave my house. To-day you will do so, bag and baggage. Go, and do not return until you agree to give up that girl."

"Do you mean that, aunt?"

"I do mean it. I always say what I mean. You are a stranger to me until you do what I command. As to the property, I will give you a week to return

here and make your peace with me. Otherwise I shall make a new will and cut you off with a shilling."

"That is unjust and tyrannical," cried the young man impetuously.

"It is my will and pleasure that it should be so," said Mrs. Baltin coldly. "I would point out that the remedy is in your hands. Go or stay."

"I'll go," said Chris, wheeling and making for the door. "Keep your money, Aunt Agnes. I shall keep Alice."

CHAPTER VI

EXILE

SARAH JUNDY was furious when Chris communicated the decision of his aunt, and would promptly have left the Manor House also but that he persuaded her to remain. The old woman's idea was that she should rent a cottage in the neighbourhood with her savings and invite Larcher to be her lodger. But Chris pointed out that she could not get a house in Wichley, as Mrs. Baltin would refuse to accept her as a tenant; and as he wished to remain in the village so as to be near Alice, it would not be much use hiring a house anywhere else. Finally, the young man suggested that by remaining with Mrs. Baltin Sarah might be able in time to ameliorate the tyrant's wrath. Sarah jumped at the idea.

"It's clever of you, Master Chris," she said, drying her eyes. "I can always slip in a word or two about her foolishness when she feels ill. Perhaps that'll frighten her into sense."

"I don't want my aunt to be frightened, Sarah. When she sees how resolutely you stand up for me as my friend, she will gradually come to see how unnecessary it is for her to behave as she is doing. Also my aunt is very frail, and she needs you to nurse her. Be kind, Sarah."

"Oh, I'll be kind, Master Chris. I hev a warm feeling for her, as we were gels together more years ago than I like to remember. But she is a worrit with her aggravating ways, as don't let a body call her soul her own. Well, my deary boy, perhaps you are right. I'll stay, but for goodness' sake, Master

Chris, do take lodgings where you'll get good food and your linen will be looked after."

"I'm going to board with Mrs. Pike," said Larcher, who was prepared for the evil day which had now arrived.

"She's better nor most," agreed Sarah grudgingly. "Clean and tidy, I don't deny, Master Chris. Will you stay here all day, deary boy, and get your things together? Heaven forgive me as I should hev to say such a thing!"

"I can arrange everything in an hour, Sarah," said Chris, with a shrug, "as I have not much that I can call my own. I'll put them together, and leave you to pack up and send the baggage to Mrs. Pike's cottage. When I return from my round let me find my things there."

"You'll come and see me sometimes, my deary boy?" pleaded the woman tearfully.

"I shall enter this house again when my aunt says that she will allow the old will to stand," said Larcher sternly. "Otherwise I shall remain away. If you like, Sarah, you can come and see me. But don't come if you risk losing your situation by doing so."

"Oh, that don't matter, Master Chris. I hev my savings, and can go when I like, me staying on only for old friendship's sake. I can do without her sooner nor she can do without me. Oh, my deary boy, kiss me!"

Chris did so, and then went to his room to gather his belongings together. In a short time he had sorted out his things, and nothing was necessary to be done save for Sarah Jundy to pack box and portmanteau. With many tears and shakings of the head she attended to the matter, while Chris went away to do his business. In spite of the blow which had befallen him, bread and butter had to be earned,

and daily life had to continue as usual, with attention to the day's affairs. Larcher mounted the motor-bicycle which he used to get about the country, and for the next seven or eight hours he was here, there, and everywhere attending to his dumb patients. The constant movement, and the need to come into contact with this stranger and that, together with the necessity of giving up his whole mind to curing sick animals, helped to dull the grief he felt at leaving his ancestral home. And Chris *did* feel grief, although he was by no means a sentimentalist. It was hard to give up his rights for the whim of a tyrannical old woman.

Larcher had chosen Mrs. Pike as his landlady because his surgery was attached to her cottage. She was a bright and cheerful little woman, the widow of a postman, and had a small income, which served to keep the roof over her head, although it was not large enough to provide her with food and coals. To get these she had allowed Mr. Larcher to use a substantial outhouse for his medicines, and now accepted him as a lodger, since the lady who had formerly lived with her had gone away. Chris had a sitting-room and a bedroom, and turned a third—which was the size of a cupboard—into a bathroom. Here he unpacked his boxes and portmanteau, arranged his things anyhow for the moment, as he intended to give them more attention later, and then dressed for the simple meal which Mrs. Pike provided. Habit and a sense of self-respect led the young man to put on his evening clothes even though he was reduced to living in so humble a way. Mrs. Pike was immensely impressed, and openly rejoiced that she had a *real* gentleman under her roof.

It was a great change from the large dining-room of the Manor House to this small room crowded with

furniture. But Chris was of a philosophic nature, and accepted his downfall with equanimity. He liked spacious apartments and luxurious surroundings, but, failing these, was content with limitation of habitation and the necessities of life. He enjoyed a dainty dinner, such as he would have had at the Manor House, but, having a good appetite, did full justice to the plain cooking of the postman's widow. Larcher had not always been so reasonable, as formerly he had wanted everything and had enjoyed nothing. What he now was Miss Hesmond had made him, and he smiled to think how he would have acted some years ago had things been then what they were now. In fact, Chris doubted if he would have given up everything for love as he had done, for in the old Adam of those years selfishness had reigned supreme. But the wise spinster had trained him to endurance and unselfishness, so that he was willing to lose all so long as he gained Alice for his wife. Chris was by no means an angel even now, but he was very much a man.

The thought of what Miss Hesmond had done to train him into acceptance of his present circumstances led Chris to think that it would be as well to pay the old maid a visit. It was necessary to acquaint her with what had happened, to seek her counsel as to what was to be done concerning Alice, and to discuss the situation generally. Miss Hesmond's cottage was only a stone-throw away, so when dinner was over Chris lighted his pipe and strolled across the near meadow to see his mentor. It was now eight o'clock, and the cool, luminous evening was delightful after the heat of the day. Mr. Larcher, wishing that he was on his way to the vicarage, sauntered leisurely along the footpath, and duly arrived at the stile. His destination was immediately beyond, and

he was just about to climb over when his way was stopped unexpectedly. Miss Dolly Banks, in a white dress and a sun-bonnet, made her appearance on the other side of the stile. She smiled largely when she met him.

"It's you, Chris?" she said agreeably, and evidently quite forgetting her last stormy interview with the young man.

"It's me," assented Mr. Larcher rather coldly, for he did not wish to again become entangled with the minx.

"I've heard all about you," said Dolly, leaning gracefully on the stile. "It's all over the village."

Chris was wilfully dense. "What is all over the village?"

"Why, that you have quarrelled with your aunt, and that she has turned you out to let you pig it at Mrs. Pike's."

"Beyond the fact that I never pig it anywhere, you are correct," retorted the young man. "Well?"

"Well, I'm sorry."

"There's no need for you to be sorry. Have you any more information concerning my private affairs?"

"Yes, I have," said Miss Banks defiantly, and wishing to give him a Roland for his Oliver. "Your aunt is going to make a new will."

"Oh, is she? Who told you?"

"Every one, for every one knows. I'm so sorry," said Dolly again.

"I daresay you are," said Chris coolly, "as now you can see it isn't worth while your bothering me to marry you. I have no money to give you and no position. You'll have a rise in the world in some other way, Miss Banks."

"Why 'Miss Banks?'" asked Dolly, distressed.

"Because, after your conduct of the other night,

I don't intend to have anything to do with you. We will keep to our respective positions for the future, if you please. To me you are Miss Banks ; to you I am Mr. Larcher."

"Position indeed!" The buxom Dolly tossed her head. "I don't see that there is much difference in our positions. If I keep a shop, you are only a Vet."

"Quite so. I am a vet. and a pauper and an exile and an outcast."

Dolly became spiteful. "I'm glad of it, as Miss Dene won't look at you now."

"Leave Miss Dene's name out of it, please."

The girl climbed over the stile, and came forward swiftly with the evident intention of throwing herself on the young man's neck. But, warned by his recent knowledge of Miss Banks' forward nature, Chris swiftly swerved, and before she could turn round he was on the other side of the stile and safe from her attentions. She stamped and burst into real tears of vexation and wounded vanity. His act had taken her by surprise.

"You *are* nasty, Chris," she wailed. "I was just about to tell you how sorry I am because I behaved wild-like the other night."

"You can tell me now," said Larcher coolly. "I'm safer on this side of the stile than on the other. Are you going to scream, as you threatened to do at the church porch?"

"Oh, don't! I didn't mean what I said. I was so mad to see you kissing——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Chris roughly. "How often am I to tell you to mention no names? Have you seen Miss Hesmond?"

"Yes," said Dolly in a still small voice.

"Then you know that she was present when I was

in the church porch with a certain lady, and also during your interview with me? "

" Yes," said Dolly, still timidly.

" And, finally, you know that as Miss Hesmond was present you cannot say a word against me or against——"

" Oh, you're going to mention names now," said Dolly sharply.

" No, I am not."

" Then I shall! Miss Dene—Miss Dene—Alice Dene. And she's a washed-out minx, like a piece of thread-paper. I'm worth a dozen of her."

" As you please. Jem Trap will benefit."

" I hate Jem Trap! "

" Oh, no, you don't. You hate *me*."

" Hate you? " Dolly came close to her side of the stile and leaned forward, her eyes flashing venomously in the twilight. " Yes, I hate you as I never thought to hate any one. You made me love you, and then threw me aside."

Chris laughed scornfully. " So you say."

" And so I can prove."

" Well, do so. At all events your clever little plot to make me compromise you and force me to marry you has come to nothing, seeing that Miss Hesmond was present to see fair play."

" Oh, I'm not done with you yet," cried Miss Banks, baffled yet furious. " You shall be paid out! I'll ruin you if I can! I'll get Jem Trap to thrash you! "

" I'm sure that you will do all you can to make mischief, my good girl," said Chris in a rather bored tone, " and you can begin at once. I see Jem coming across the field. I suppose you came out to meet him? "

Dolly turned and saw a big man trudging sullenly along the footpath. In a moment or so Trap had

come right up to the stile, and stood glowering at the pair. He was over six feet, and his body was correspondingly large. No one could deny but what he was a handsome man in a boorish way, but his good looks were marred by a sulky expression, which boded ill for those who crossed him. He was well-featured, and had fair hair and a short fair beard, so that on the whole he was comely to look at. Any girl in Dolly's position would have been proud to have him as a lover. Unfortunately Miss Banks preferred the refined face and slim figure of Chris to the gigantic proportions of this rustic Adonis. Jem had a temper, as was very evident from the dour expression with which he looked at Chris and Dolly.

"Seems as I ain't wanted," said Trap sarcastically.

"Seems you are," retorted Mr. Larcher. "I am on my way to Miss Hesmond, and met Miss Banks at this stile. She, I understand, was on her way to meet you."

"Yes, I was, Jem," cried Dolly tearfully, "and he stopped me and wanted to kiss me. Indeed he did."

Chris laughed and shrugged. The lie was so patent that it was not worth while to deny it. "Do you believe that, Jem?" he asked lightly.

"Jem had better," said Miss Banks in threatening tones. "If he don't I shan't have anything to do with him."

"You'll do what you're told," said Trap between his teeth, and gripping her shoulder so hard that she cried out. "You're my gel and not his."

"Oh, I don't want her," said Larcher indifferently; "but you needn't treat her so harshly, Jem. Leave go her shoulder; you are hurting her."

"I'll twist her neck if she carries on with you, Mr. Larcher."

"She's not carrying on with me, and I'm not carrying on with her."

"All the better. I'd strangle her and fight you," growled Jem, tightening his brawny grip.

"Jem! Jem! You are hurting me."

"Leave go, man," said Chris sharply.

"He shall leave go if he likes, and not because you tell him," cried Dolly, with the inconsequence of a woman. "Mind your own business!"

"You don't blind me in this way," said Trap viciously, and twisted Dolly out of the way so that he came face to face with Larcher. "She's come here to meet you, she has."

"Nothing of the sort. Don't be a fool!"

"I bean't a fule. But you're a bad 'un, Mr. Larcher."

"As you please," said Chris, who thought that the interview had lasted long enough since he was not likely to obtain fair play. "Good-bye," and sauntered away.

But Dolly was furious to see him escape so easily, and did her best to promote trouble. "He's running away because he's afraid to fight."

"Just that," said Larcher over his shoulder.

"Why don't you thrash him, Jem?" she said venomously.

Trap caught fire, and lumbered heavily over the stile. Chris heard him coming, and turned sharply to face the worst. "You fight me as man to man," said the rustic lover, breathing heavily and clenching his huge fists. "If you beat, then I'll say as you're white; if I beat you, then own up as you're playing the fule with my gel."

"That's fair enough," agreed Chris, putting his pipe in his pocket and removing his overcoat. "Anything for a quiet life. Stand up!"

Jem was a trifle wild, but Chris kept himself well in hand as the two faced one another under an elm which overhung the smooth sward by the roadside. Dolly, thrilled with delight that they were fighting over her, leaned on the stile and applauded like a Roman empress at a gladiatorial combat. "Give it him hot, Jem!" she called out.

"You shut your mouth!" grumbled the big man. "I'll fight fair, and if he licks me you look out for yourself, my gel."

This warning somewhat cooled Dolly's ardour to see Chris beaten, but all the same she looked eagerly on. Three times Trap swung his right at his opponent's head, but Chris was always out of range. Then Larcher leaped in unexpectedly and gave Jem three or four upper cuts on the chin, while the man plunged wildly. Trap had strength but not science, while Chris was an accomplished boxer, so Dolly saw with dismay and yet with some relief that her rustic swain was likely to get the worst of it. Jem sent in a few strong blows, but so swiftly did Chris dodge that they did less damage than might have been expected. Larcher got rather short-winded with these sharp punches on the body, and played for time. When he recovered his breath again he determined to finish the fight, and sent in a left on Jem's chin, following it up with so straight and powerful a blow on the jaw that Trap measured his length on the sward. Dolly uttered a cry of dismay at the fall of her champion, while Chris waited to see if the fight was to be renewed. But Jem rose rather dazed, feeling his jaw tenderly, and, after staggering about a bit, held out his hand. He did not wish to fight any more.

"I'm beat," said Trap generously, "and you're a man, Mr. Larcher. You've fought me fair, and a cove as can do that ain't no bad 'un, as they say."

"Thanks, all right," said Chris, shaking hands readily enough. "Believe me, Jem, I have nothing to do with the girl. I wish you'd make her leave me alone."

"Nothing to do with me? Liar!" cried Dolly furiously.

Jem climbed over the stile again in his heavy way. "You hold your jaw," he growled menacingly. "You've seen wot you've seen, and you know as there ain't anything wrong with a man as has stood up to me. None of your lies, my gel."

"Don't be hard on her, Jem," said Chris, putting on his coat again.

"No, I won't. But she's got to come to me and leave you alone, sir."

"I'll do nothing of the sort. You're a pair of cowards," cried Miss Banks, and, evading Jem's grasp, she fled across the field.

"It's all right between us, Mr. Larcher," said Jem, with a wink. "You can count on me. I'll put her right." And, nodding towards the flying figure, he lumbered after the lady into the gathering dusk.

Chris, now quite sure that Dolly was settled once and for all, thanks to Miss Hesmond and Jem, laughed a little, and turned on his heel. He felt rather sore about the body, as Trap's fist had done some damage; but it was worth while to feel the pain if only to get rid of Miss Banks' unwelcome attentions. In a few minutes he was in Miss Hesmond's house describing the Homeric combat, much to the old maid's delight.

"I'm glad you fought it out like men," said Miss Hesmond, when she had made sure that Chris required no medical attention.

"Eh? What?" said Larcher, with a twinkle

in his eyes. "Aren't you an apostle of peace, Miss Hesmond?"

"I am not a sentimentalist," she replied, with a smile, "and I believe in a man being a man. If you hadn't fought Jem Trap, I should not respect you as I do now. What is more, you will have no further trouble with that Atè, who is always trying to make mischief."

"I hope Jem won't harm her," said Larcher anxiously.

"Oh dear me no," rejoined Miss Hesmond coolly. "He'll bring her to her senses somehow, and make a decent character of her. She's a minx, and the sooner she's brought to see that Jem won't stand her nonsense the better for her."

"Well, Jem's a good sort of fellow," said Chris, taking out his pipe, "even though his character is as bad as mine."

"Jem is a good fellow," assented Miss Hesmond emphatically. "He works hard, and is fond of his grandmother, that old Corn woman. Sometimes he poaches and drinks, but we can't all be perfect. When he marries he'll give up his wild ways. Like you, Chris, he is a young bull in a flowery meadow—the meadow of youth."

"You are very tolerant."

"Of course I am. We all have our faults, though some people's faults are not those of other people's. But we needn't talk of Jem and Dolly any more. Leave them alone to settle their own affairs, which don't concern us. I want to hear about *your* affairs, Chris."

"Well, you know that I have left the Manor House."

Miss Hesmond, who had taken up her knitting and had resumed her seat in the deep armchair which

was her throne, nodded. "It's all over the village. Mrs. Baltin has turned you out because you wish to marry Alice, and has threatened to disinherit you."

Chris nodded in his turn. "How the dickens did the news get about?"

"Sarah Jundy told the Manor House servants, and they told the villagers. You have been round the country attending to your business the whole day, Chris, and during that time people have been talking about you."

"Talking bad as usual, I suppose?"

"Indeed, no. There is quite a revulsion of feeling in your favour. It is considered that a man who gives up everything for love is a hero."

"Oh, bosh! I wish Sarah had held her confounded tongue."

"I don't," said Miss Hesmond promptly. "I am against gossip as a rule, but it is just as well that the villagers should know the truth, and that you are in the right. Sarah, by telling what she has told, will help you to get back that character which you lost with your wildness. You see, I speak frankly."

"I always want you to speak frankly to me," said Larcher heartily. "But all this talk will harm my aunt, and she isn't popular as it is."

"Your aunt should not behave so scandalously," said Miss Hesmond calmly. "She needs a lesson, and will get one. Every person in the village will be on your side, Chris—the men because Jem Trap will tell how you stood up to him like a man, and the women because you have given up rank and money for love."

"Am I right to do so?" asked Chris dubiously, and staring at the floor.

"Quite right!" Miss Hesmond was very emphatic. "Quite right! Loving Alice as you do, you have

acted in a way which shows how true your love is. All is turning out for the best, my dear boy."

"What! when I have lost my home and my inheritance?"

"Yes. You are now quite independent, and therefore have to fight like Henry of the Wynd for your own hand. And, after all, Chris, you can't expect to get off scot-free. You played the fool for some years, and therefore to knock you into shape it is necessary that you should have trouble. See how it is making a man of you, and how it is restoring your character. If you had acted otherwise," ended the old lady emphatically, "both as regards Trap and your aunt and Alice, I should have been very disappointed with my friend. And I'll stand by you while you're in the fiery furnace, Chris, being shaped into an instrument for the use of the great Master."

"Oh," said Chris, in some dismay, "am I to remain in the furnace?"

"Of course. You shall remain until you come out refined gold."

"Well, to vary your metaphor, Grain said that I was stepping into dark clouds, or, rather, would step into them if I persisted in loving Alice."

"Grain? Who is Grain? And what does he know about it?"

Chris looked up. "I forgot. You don't know what led to my aunt turning me out of the house. Listen," and he related what had taken place on the previous night. Miss Hesmond gave all her attention to the narrative, but neither frowned, nor smiled, nor spoke, nor even made a movement. When Chris ended she did not comment on his narrative, but asked her former question, "Who is Grain?"

Chris went to work again, and related the story as told to him by Sarah Jundy at breakfast. This

time Miss Hesmond showed signs of uneasiness, and winced once or twice. "What do you think of the whole business?" asked the young man when she was in possession of all the facts.

"I think that things are worse than I guessed," said Miss Hesmond slowly. "The intrusion of the Unseen into the Seen points to danger."

"To my aunt?"

"To your aunt and to you, and possibly to Alice, because she is connected with you, Chris."

"But surely you don't believe in this rubbish concerning spirits?" questioned Larcher seriously, and rather astonished.

"There is great truth in spiritism," said Miss Hesmond dryly, "and, as it happens, I know something about the truth. To-night we need not talk about it. I must seek guidance and comfort in prayer."

"But is it so serious as that?"

"Yes; more serious than you think. Your aunt and Dr. Pess are opening a door which they cannot close, and the consequence may be disastrous. Promise me, Chris, to do nothing without consulting me."

And Chris promised solemnly. All the same, he was rather surprised that Miss Hesmond should be so disturbed.

CHAPTER VII

A SOLEMN WARNING

Out of evil came good, as Miss Hesmond had prophesied, for Larcher's character was quite rehabilitated by late events. At the Red Horse Jem Trap was loud in his praises, as he was flattered that a gentleman should have honestly fought him, even at the cost of conquest. He gave every one clearly to understand that there was no truth in the rumours of Larcher's philandering with Dolly, and likewise announced that he was formally "walking out" with the girl with a view to an early marriage. Dolly was too cowed to object, as her rustic lover had shown very plainly that he was not to be trifled with. She admired Chris more than ever for his victory over Jem, and hated him more than ever because he had escaped from her toils. All her visions had burst like so many bubbles, and she became quite resigned to the fact that Larcher was likely to marry Miss Dene. Nevertheless, she privately determined to prevent the marriage if possible, and was always on the watch for an opportunity to do so. Miss Banks was a "woman scorned," and intended to make mischief.

The women also were pleased that Chris had given up everything for love, and gossiped incessantly over the romance of the affair. They had always admired the young squire, as Chris was called, for his good looks and cheery manners, although they considered that he was too wild to be trusted. Now he was a hero in their eyes, and they forgave him all his alleged profligacy. It was quite a triumph for Chris. As for Mrs. Baltin, public opinion was wholly against her.

Never very popular on account of her autocratic ways, she now lost what little popularity she had. Every one wished that she would die, and that Larcher would come into his kingdom. But, as Mrs. Baltin was able to dispose of the property as she liked, there seemed to be little chance of the young squire getting his lawful rights. The week during which Chris was to finally make up his mind to obey or disobey his aunt was nearly at an end. He still continued obstinate, and still intended to marry Alice when possible, so it was unlikely that he would ever live again in the Manor House. There was tremendous excitement in Wichley over the quarrel between nephew and aunt, and the first was praised as greatly as the second was condemned. No one had a good word for Mrs. Baltin, and had she gone abroad she would have been greeted with sour looks and signs of disapprobation. But the determined old autocrat remained in the seclusion of her gloomy home, and defied every one.

Occasionally during the week Chris caught a glimpse or two of Alice and had a word or two with the girl. But her father was now more resolute than ever to prevent the marriage. He had never approved of the young man's wild ways, and was blind to his reformation. The objection taken by the vicar to Mrs. Baltin's spiritualism was a mere excuse to put an end to Larcher's hopes; and now that the young man was poor, Dene rejoiced that he had done so. It was by no means a generous attitude, especially for a clergyman, who should have lived in charity with all men. But Mr. Dene was narrow in his views, and as tyrannical as Mrs. Baltin in his temperament. He did not want his daughter to marry to please herself, but to please him. Therefore he kept a particularly sharp eye on her when the news arrived of Larcher's quixotic behaviour, and Alice had no chance of having an

exhaustive conversation with her lover. It was a dark hour for both, but they remained true to one another in spite of all. And Miss Hesmond, as the fairy-god-mother, did her best to make things easy for the unhappy pair, although she could do very little. Still, she did her best, and the lovers were grateful for her sympathy.

The old maid was, indeed, very disturbed, not only on account of the young people, whom she loved, but because of Mrs. Baltin's tamperings with the Unseen. Miss Hesmond was a good churchwoman, and subscribed to all that the Church taught. But she was also that rare being, a mystic, and knew more about psychic matters than most people. Always of an inquiring turn of mind, she had earnestly investigated Theosophy, and found that, far from shaking her faith, it enlightened and confirmed it. She learned that the outer teaching of the Church was merely a reflection of the inner teaching, and thus gained an intellectual as well as an emotional understanding. In a word, Miss Hesmond had found, as other people had found, the lost Mysteries of the Christian Faith known to the primitive Church. There was not a thing taught by the orthodox religion to which she could not heartily subscribe, and there was nothing commanded by the same which she did not practise. The only difference between her religion and that of others was that she knew why she believed, whereas the majority did not. It was very comforting to her to know what she did know, as she was thus enabled to live a more perfect life.

Aware of the dangers of unguided intercourse with the next world, Miss Hesmond was very distressed to find that Mrs. Baltin and Dr. Pess were taking advantage of their trifling knowledge to do so. Being a woman who granted to others the same freedom that she

claimed for herself, she did not like to interfere, as, from her enlightened point of view, it was wrong to do so. But after much consideration and earnest prayer she determined to call and see Mrs. Baltin about the matter. Not only did the old maid hope to stop these unholy practices, but also hoped to reconcile Mrs. Baltin to her nephew, and thus remove the barrier between the young man and the vicar's daughter. Towards the end of the week, therefore, Miss Hesmond arrayed herself in her best clothes and paid a state visit. She did not tell Chris that she was going to venture into the lion's den, nor did she give any explanation to Alice. It was unwise, she thought, to raise their hopes, as nothing might come of the matter. If anything did, however, the lovers would experience a greater and more unexpected joy than if they knew beforehand what she was attempting. So Miss Hesmond went on her errand of charity, trusting that Mrs. Baltin would listen to reason. But it must be confessed that she had not much hope of success.

As it happened, the lady of the manor was walking in the garden when her visitor came up the avenue. She looked more majestic and unapproachable than ever, and her eyes were as hard as those of a cat when she saw Miss Hesmond approaching. There was a great contrast between the two women. The rosy-faced old maid in her ancient garb, which was so plain and unfashionable and homely, was wholly different to the stately dame with her inscrutable expression and rich dress. Arrayed in her usual black velvet, with much lace and many diamonds, Mrs. Baltin moved feebly up and down the path leaning on her silver-headed cane. But if her body was feeble by reason of her great age, her spirit was strong enough, as her hard blue eyes blazed immediately she saw who her visitor was. She guessed on what errand the old spinster had come, and

immediately became domineering and rude, according to her custom.

"I should have refused to see you had I been within doors," said Mrs. Baltin in her harsh, imperious voice; "but as you have caught me let us have as few words as possible. It is quite useless."

"What is useless?" asked Miss Hesmond, so cheerfully and wonderingly that Mrs. Baltin became even more annoyed than she was.

"You know quite well. I know that you have come here to ask me to take back Christopher. You have always abetted him in his wrong-doing, and it is your influence that has brought about this rebellion."

"I am sorry that you should think so," said Miss Hesmond quietly, as she did not think it necessary to deny this untruth.

"I do think so; and, what is more, I am right, as I always am. If you come as an ambassador from Christopher, you are wasting your time. Unless," added the old tyrant, fixing her hard eyes on the little woman, "you bring to me his complete submission to my will."

"I don't bring that, and——"

"Then you can go."

"Nor is the main object of my visit one with which Chris has to do. Later, if you like, I can speak about him, but just now I have come to warn you."

"Warn me, woman?" Mrs. Baltin drew herself up, coldly furious to be spoken to thus. "What do you mean?"

Miss Hesmond could have cried over the silly vanity and weak pompousness of this old creature, who believed herself to be so strong. But being accustomed to deal with fools, who are entirely dominated by their passions, she continued to smile quietly, looking round meantime for a seat. Come what may, she did not

intend to leave the grounds until she had given her warning, and wished to rest after her walk, since she was none too strong. Before her was the old Manor House, looking more picturesque and gloomy than ever in the sunshine, while around her were the lawns bordered by many beds of brilliantly-coloured flowers, the whole being girdled by the trees of the park. Towards the end of the path up and down which Mrs. Baltin was walking Miss Hesmond saw a marble bench, under the shade of a huge oak, immediately on the outskirts of the wood. With an air of fatigue she pleaded to be allowed to sit down, and on receiving a surly assent walked towards this haven. Mrs. Baltin followed in her grand way, and shortly the two old women were at ease beneath the shade.

"What do you mean, woman, by saying that you have come to warn me?" demanded Mrs. Baltin still wrathfully.

"I shall tell you later," said Miss Hesmond quietly; "but just now I would remind you that as your visitor——"

"An unbidden one," interpolated the old dame.

"I grant that. Still, I am your visitor, and therefore I am entitled to the ordinary courtesies of life."

In spite of her bullying ways, which had been fostered by an easy life, Mrs. Baltin was a lady. "I apologize," she said coldly and with an effort. "We may as well conduct this unsought-for interview politely."

"Thank you. I have come to speak to you about this spiritualism, which——"

The lady of the manor arose furiously to strike her stick on the ground. "I forbid you to meddle with what does not concern you!"

"Pardon me, the danger of another person or of any person concerns me."

"I know," said Mrs. Baltin, still disdainful and still

standing, "that you are one of those meddlesome people who interfere with others. I have heard what your opinions are concerning my doings with Dr. Pess as regards intercourse with the other world. But let me tell you that I refuse to tolerate your speaking to me about these things."

"Believe me, I come as a friend. You are in danger."

Proud and obstinate as Mrs. Baltin was, she would have been more than human had she not asked her next question. "Danger? And from whom?"

"From Simon Grain," said Miss Hesmond distinctly.

The old dame's limbs gave way. Her already white face grew even whiter as slowly she sank down on to the marble seat, trembling visibly from head to foot. It was some time before she could speak, and when she did speak it was in a whisper. "What—do—you—know—of—him?"

"All that Chris could tell me."

"Chris?" The mention of her nephew seemed to nerve Mrs. Baltin and do away quickly with her weakness. "And what does Chris know?"

"He was present the other night when you fainted at the mention of the name, and afterwards he made inquiries about the name. Natural enough, poor boy," said Miss Hesmond softly, "since he was anxious to know why you should faint."

"He made inquiries?" said Mrs. Baltin, with a hard look in her eyes. "I know from whom. She shall suffer." And raising a small silver whistle to her lips—she produced the same from her pocket—she blew a shrill call.

Miss Hesmond made no remark, nor did Mrs. Baltin seem to expect any. With her cruel eyes fixed on the front door of the house, she waited in silence. In a few minutes Sarah Jundy was seen to issue from

the door and walk quickly down the path. The little old creature, in her gaudy dress and with her lean face, looked quite uncanny in the sunshine as she flew towards her mistress with an activity wonderful for one of her years. Shortly she arrived at the marble bench, and waited in silence for instructions. Mrs. Baltin looked at her fiercely.

"Sarah Jundy, how dare you speak about my private affairs to Christopher?"

"Why shouldn't I, Miss Agnes? He's your nephew, ain't he?"

"That does not give you the right to tell him about—about"—Mrs. Baltin's hard voice faltered—"Simon—Grain."

"There now!" said Sarah vivaciously. "And I thought my deary boy 'ud never tell what I told! Not as I'm ashamed of myself, Miss Agnes. He wanted to know why you fainted when you heard the name from one of them devils of yours, and, of course, I let on why you did."

"Woman, be silent!" said Mrs. Baltin, striking her stick on the grass. "Christopher has told Miss Hesmond, and she has come here to meddle with my concerns."

"Well," said Sarah Jundy philosophically, "if she can only get you to leave off talking to them devils, she'll be doing a good day's work."

"You go this day month," raged Mrs. Baltin furiously. "I have put up with your insolence long enough."

"This day month," said Sarah, not deigning to argue the point. "Well, now as I know, I can get ready. Anything else, Miss Agnes?"

"Get out of my sight!"

Sarah moved away swiftly without further speech. "I'll bring your tea at four o'clock as usual," she

called back over her shoulder, determined to have the last word.

Mrs. Baltin paid no attention to what she said, but turned towards Miss Hesmond. "Are you satisfied?" she asked. "You have lost the woman her situation."

"I hope not," said Miss Hesmond, with a pained look. "After all, no harm has been done. What Chris told me is quite a secret. Don't punish Sarah for her kindness of heart."

"Her kindness of heart? How do you make that out?"

"Well, Chris wished to know why you fainted at the mention of the name, and the boy was so distressed that Sarah told him."

"She had no business to tell him. However, as she has told him, she shall go; and as you know what it was not intended you should know, I am ready to listen to your warning. Say what you have to say and go, for never will you set foot on my grounds again. With regard to Christopher——"

"I don't wish to talk of Chris until I have warned you."

"You shall talk of what I please, and it pleases me to talk of my nephew. If he is still determined to marry that girl, I shall alter my will the day after to-morrow. My solicitor has already been warned, and will come from Town to draw up the new will."

"You are acting very unjustly. How will you appear before your Judge when you, at your age, are doing so wicked a thing?"

"That's my business, Miss Hesmond. Yours is to tell me if Christopher intends to return and obey me."

"No," said Miss Hesmond bluntly, "he doesn't."

"Very good. Then this place and the income and the village—in fact, the whole of the Baltin property—goes to Dr. Pess."

Miss Hesmond uttered an exclamation. "Did the spirits tell you to leave the property to him?" she asked contemptuously.

"No, they didn't. I leave it to him as he is a good man, and will establish here a house which will enable the spirits to communicate more easily—a house of power, and——"

"Of unholy power."

"How dare you say that?"

"Because I know more about these things than you do, Mrs. Baltin. Stop!" Miss Hesmond raised her hand in quite as imperious a way as Mrs. Baltin could have done. "I have come here to warn you, and warn you I must. You are tampering foolishly with a power of which you know nothing; you are opening a door which you will not be able to close."

"I don't agree with you," said the old dame, rather cowed, as she began to realize that her visitor spoke with frank and fearless authority.

"Because you know nothing of what you are doing. I speak, not of myself, but because I have been told what to say, and the warning comes from a high source."

"Oh"—Mrs. Baltin looked interested—"then you also have a spirit-guide?"

"No, I have not—at least, not in the sense you mean. Authority and instruction are given to me in a way of which you know nothing, and of which you will continue to know nothing until your pride is broken and your selfish nature subdued."

"I am not selfish," protested Mrs. Baltin, more and more impressed, for Miss Hesmond *was* impressing her, through her superstition, quite in the right way.

"You are," insisted the other woman. "You live for yourself alone, and you have always lived for yourself alone. You are selfish in forcing Chris to give up

the girl he loves ; you are selfish in using your power to dispose of the property wrongly. It belongs to him."

" It belongs to me."

" No, it does not. Chris has the Baltin blood in him, and, therefore, should inherit what his ancestors inherited before him. But as to this, you can do as you choose, since you have free-will. Then"—Miss Hesmond looked solemn—" you must take the consequences."

" What are the consequences ? " asked Mrs. Baltin in a rather faltering tone, and passing her tongue over her dry lips.

" That I may not say," said the old maid, following up her advantage. " What I *do* say is that these spirits which you invoke are merely earth-bound creatures who know little more than they did when in their physical bodies. It is the duty of the soul to soar after death to higher spheres, and those who remain earth-bound are delaying their progress. I am speaking of souls so that you may understand," ended Miss Hesmond, " but that is not quite correct. It is the personality which must return upwards to the soul."

" What is the personality ? "

" That which you know as Mrs. Baltin ; that which I know as Jane Hesmond. Of our true selves, our souls, we know nothing. And yet the soul is not the spirit."

" Oh, I'm tired of your jargon," cried Mrs. Baltin, striving to escape from the spell which this new and fascinating teaching was weaving round her. " You are trying to muddle me with words. Be plain."

" I will be plain," said Miss Hesmond resolutely. " These earth-bound spirits are able, if the will of any person be surrendered unto them, to enter into that

person's body. Dr. Pess gave up his will the other night, and Simon Grain came back to use it. From what Sarah Jundy told Chris and Chris told me, you behaved badly towards him, and he promised to return and harm you."

"It is not possible that he, a disembodied spirit, can do so," said Mrs. Baltin, trying her best to be disdainful.

"He is not disembodied while he uses the body of Dr. Pess," insisted Miss Hesmond. "You are allowing him a habitation on earth, and he will thus be able to harm you."

"In what way?"

"I cannot say. But you are doing a dangerous thing; you are tampering with forces and powers of which you know nothing. Being selfish, you are evil; and being evil, you attract evil creatures who will work you evil. Simon Grain killed himself because he hated you for your treatment of him. All these many years he had been watching for a chance to return and revenge himself on you. His chance has come with Dr. Pess, whose body is surrendered to him."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried Mrs. Baltin, standing up.

Miss Hesmond stood up also. "Believe or not, as you please. What I say is correct, and I have been permitted by the authority I mentioned to give you this solemn warning."

"Pardon me, but as yet you have given me no explicit warning."

"I give it now. Stop tampering with earth-bound spirits; send Dr. Pess away; become reconciled to your nephew, and allow him to marry Alice; leave him his lawful rights and property and money in full; and make Mr. Dene see reason, so that the marriage

may take place. Do this, and you will undo much of the harm you have done through ignorance. Refuse, and the consequences will be on your own head."

Mrs. Baltin by this time was quite her old bitter, tyrannical self. "I have listened quietly to your rubbish," she said harshly, "and I don't deny but what some of the things you have said may be true. But the end of your talk reveals the reason why you have come. It is not to give me a warning that you are in my grounds. You have merely come to make me give way to Christopher."

"Indeed, no. There you have free-will. I merely warn you of the consequences."

"I am quite content to abide by the consequences," retorted Mrs. Baltin fiercely, "let them be what they may. I never feared that fool Grain in his life, and I am not going to fear him now that he has been in his grave these forty years. And let me tell you that Grain is against this marriage."

"With what an earth-bound and revengeful spirit says I have nothing to do," said Miss Hesmond quietly, and moving away. "I have delivered my warning, which you can accept or reject as you please. I thank you for listening to what appears to be impertinence on my part, and I shall now take my leave."

"I believe you mean well," observed Mrs. Baltin, reluctantly polite, "but in future I must ask you to mind your own business."

Miss Hesmond, seeing that further argument was useless, bent her head and continued to move towards the avenue. All at once she heard an indignant cry from her hostess, and looked back to see the old lady hauling a man from behind the oak. It was Jem Trap, and although he could easily have wrenched himself free, he submitted to be dragged out on to the grass by the furious woman. Miss Hesmond hurried back

promptly to play, if possible, the part of peacemaker. Mrs. Baltin was trembling with rage.

"What are you doing here, James Trap?" she demanded, shaking her stick at him.

"I only came in over the wall to get some herbs for Gran," said the big man, rising sheepishly, and twisting his cap in his large hands. "There's herbs in this place as Gran can't get anywhere else, and she needs 'em."

"For some of her wickedness, I have no doubt," cried Mrs. Baltin angrily.

"No, no!" put in Miss Hesmond soothingly. "Mother Corn makes up herbal medicines for sick people. She has even made them up for Chris in his profession."

"That of a veterinary surgeon," said Mrs. Baltin bitterly, and infuriated by the mention of her hated nephew's name. "A nice profession, I declare!"

"Mr. Larcher is a gentleman, whatever he does," growled Jem truculently. "He stood up to me as a man, he did."

"Don't you dare to talk in my presence unless I order you to!" cried Mrs. Baltin. "How dare you come here, you creature?" And with a sudden spring, quite unexpected in so old a woman, she snatched the basket which Jem had on his arm and scattered the herbs he had gathered. "Go away, or I'll have you arrested for trespass, you low man."

"Here, don't you go on like that," said Trap threateningly, "or I'll tell every one about your devilries. I listened behind that there oak, and I hear as how you made a cove commit suicide, and are going to kick out Mr. Larcher and give what ain't yours to that blamed Dr. Pess. Oh, I heard, and——"

Mrs. Baltin, never having her temper under control, lost it altogether, and laid her stick lustily about Jem's brawny shoulders. The great man clenched his fists.

but yet had the self-control not to defend himself. Miss Hesmond thrust herself between the furious old beldame and her victim, as she saw murder in the man's eye, and dreaded what he might do.

"Mrs. Baltin! Mrs. Baltin! You are forgetting yourself!" she said, pushing back the old woman, who was glaring at Jem, white and furious. "Go away, Trap, and be thankful you have escaped so easily. You might have been arrested, and rightly so, for trespass."

"I'm going," said Jem, and slouched off quickly, glad to be out of Mrs. Baltin's reach. "I'll pay you out for this, you old devil!" he called back, and shook his fist threateningly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICAR'S DECISION

JEM TRAP lost no time in telling what he had overheard, as he was so furious at the way in which Mrs. Baltin had treated him that he wished to do her as much harm as possible. In the taproom of the Red Horse he gave full details. Mrs. Baltin had in early days driven her lover to suicide ; Mrs. Baltin intended to leave the village, the Manor House, and the money to Dr. Pess ; Mr. Larcher was to be cut off with a shilling because he wished to marry the daughter of the vicar ; and, finally, Mrs. Baltin talked with devils who were bent upon doing mischief. The sensation caused by these revelations was very great, and it was lucky for the lady of the manor that she lived in civilized times. Two hundred years earlier and the villagers would have stormed the house, to burn her alive when captured. As it was, many were the threats made against her when it was known that Wichley was to be handed over to Pess. Apart from the fact that the desire of every one was that Chris should succeed to his rightful inheritance, the inhabitants of Wichley did not relish having over them a new lord of the manor who was a stranger to their customs. Mrs. Baltin, by her ill-advised action with regard to Trap, had indeed stirred up a nest of hornets. The whole village was in ferment.

Miss Hesmond sent for Chris the day after her fruitless interview with Mrs. Baltin, and reported all that had happened. The young man knew much about the matter prior to his visit, as business had kept him

hovering round the village all the morning. Naturally Jem's revelations had spread like wildfire, and several people spoke to Larcher on the subject. Angry as Chris was with his aunt, which was natural considering her behaviour, he was annoyed to think that she should be talked about in this way. He said as much to Miss Hesmond when she placed him in possession of all that she knew.

"I have had one fight with Jem over Dolly," said Chris angrily, "and it seems to me that I'll have another fight over my aunt."

"That will do no good, my dear boy," said Miss Hesmond, shaking her head; "the mischief is done. Let us hope that it will be a lesson to your aunt to keep her temper."

"Trap is not the person to give my aunt lessons," retorted Larcher hotly. "I don't see by what right he talks of what does not concern him."

"Oh, Chris, have you been so long in the world and yet have not learned what people are? How can you expect a rough man like Jem to hold his tongue when he has been treated unjustly?"

"Unjustly?" muttered Chris wrathfully. "I'm not so sure of that. Jem was trespassing, and deserved what he got."

"I don't agree with you, Chris. Mrs. Baltin could have had him arrested, and should have done so. But she had no right to take the law into her own hands as she did. Anyhow, that is not the point."

"Well, Miss Hesmond, what is the point?" he asked impatiently.

"The point is that Mrs. Baltin intends to leave the property to Dr. Pess. That is unfair to you, Chris, seeing that you are her lawful heir. You must protest at once."

"What good will that do? You know how obstinate she is."

"Yes, I know. All the same, you must not allow your inheritance to slip from you without making some effort to keep it. Go and see a lawyer, Chris, and get him to write to your aunt."

"It's only waste of time and money," said Larcher gloomily.

Miss Hesmond feared inwardly that it was so, yet held to her point. "At all events, if it cannot do good it cannot do harm," she urged, "and you must do what you can to get your own in justice to yourself. Of course, there is another way, Chris. Mrs. Balin, in the course of nature, cannot live long. Why not give up all idea of Alice for the time being and return to the Manor House? Then she will have no excuse to charge her will, and when she is dead and you are the squire you can make Alice your wife."

"I daresay; but meantime that man Felk may carry her off."

"I don't think that Alice is the girl to be carried off," said Miss Hesmond dryly. "In spite of her delicate looks, she has much courage."

"But her father?"

"Go and face her father this very day. Ask him plainly what he has against you. We know it is only because your aunt is a spiritualist that he objects to his daughter marrying her nephew. If I could only have frightened your aunt into giving up her silly craze," sighed the old maid, "Mr. Dene would perhaps have made it up with her."

"I don't think so. He is narrow, and my aunt is a fanatic. They would only meet to quarrel. They have always quarrelled, and they always will. But your suggestion that I should see Mr. Dene is a good one. I'll go about four o'clock and have it out with him."

Anyhow, a conversation will clear the air, and I'll know where I stand. Do you think that Sarah Jundy really will go?"

Miss Hesmond hesitated. "Your aunt appeared to be very determined. And, as we know, she is very obstinate."

Chris nodded. "All the same, she has been used to Sarah for over thirty years, and at her age it will be difficult for her to get used to another person. If Sarah does go, she can come and keep house for me, as I shall then take a cottage. But I don't believe that my aunt will send her away."

"I think she will, Chris," said Miss Hesmond, after further consideration. "It is indirectly through Sarah that this painful story of Simon Grain has come out. If Sarah had not told you, and you had not told me, I should not have discussed it with Mrs. Baltin, and Jem would not have heard what he did hear."

"I'll wring his neck!"

"Don't be silly, Chris. You must tread warily, as you are on dangerous ground, my dear boy."

There was silence for a few moments, while Miss Hesmond thought and Chris fumed. He was seated on her little sofa with his back to the open window, while the old maid occupied her throne directly in front of him. Being thus placed she could see out of doors, and before the silence was broken arose with a look of surprise to observe that Dr. Pess had come up the garden path. Chris immediately objected to seeing the man, as it was not to be expected—so he said—that he should be friendly with one who was about to steal his property. Miss Hesmond, with her strong common sense, overruled him, and pointed out that it was just as well that Pess should be heard, as it was unfair to condemn him without a hearing. When Larcher grumblingly consented to an interview, Miss Hesmond

went herself to the door, and shortly returned with a wildly excited little man.

"I have been to Mrs. Pike's, Chris," said the doctor, whose face was very red, and whose eyes were very staring. "She told me that you had gone to see Miss Hesmond, so I came on. My dear boy, believe me I have nothing to do with the matter—you know—eh?"

"What matter?" asked Chris coldly.

"Don't speak like that, Chris," implored Pess earnestly. "There is no reason why we shouldn't be friends."

"How can I be friends with a man who proposes to take what is mine?"

"I don't propose to do so," cried the doctor frantically. "I have enough money for my needs, and I have begged and implored Mrs. Baltin to allow her will to stand. It is drawn up in your favour, as it should be, and you are the heir to everything."

"If you do not want the property," said Miss Hesmond shrewdly, "why has Mrs. Baltin come to her unjust determination?"

"It's the spirits," said Pess reluctantly.

"Hum! I thought so," murmured the old maid.

"Oh, rubbish!" cried Larcher vigorously. "I'm a plain man, Pess, and I don't believe in all this trash about spirits. You want the property, and you are using your influence with my silly old aunt to get it."

"I swear by all that is holy that I am using no influence," said Pess wildly; "and if the property does come to me I shall make it over to you by deed of gift, Chris. Miss Hesmond is a witness to my intention. Or, here"—Pess glanced round recklessly—"give me pen and ink and paper. I shall draw up a deed of renunciation."

The man appeared to be in dead earnest, yet Chris did not accept his proposal straight away, as might have been expected. "You can scarcely renounce what you do not possess," he observed dryly; "that is, if the old will still stands."

"It still stands," assented Pess, sitting down and rubbing his hands in his old familiar way. "But Mrs. Baltin's lawyer will arrive to-morrow to draw up a fresh will in my favour if you don't agree to give up Miss Dene."

"I have no intention of giving up Miss Dene," said Chris obstinately; "you can be certain on that point. But what put it into my aunt's head to make you her heir unless you suggested the idea and are influencing her to carry it out?"

"It was Simon Grain!"

Larcher would have spoken, if only to express his disbelief in the return of a man dead and buried these forty years, but that Miss Hesmond threw up her hand to silence him. "Let us hear what the doctor has to say."

"I say this," remarked Pess, now growing calmer, "that I have heard in the village what that man Trap has been saying with regard to Simon Grain. I swear that I never heard the name until you told me, Chris, after the séance, as I was not conscious while Grain was speaking through me. If it is true that Mrs. Baltin drove him to suicide——"

"It is true," interrupted Miss Hesmond quickly. "Jem Trap overheard a conversation I had with Mrs. Baltin on the subject."

"Yes, I know. He has told every one, and I heard all details from Mrs. Banks when I went to the post office an hour ago. At once I came to see Chris, and followed him here. Well, there it is and there it is—you know—eh?"

"I don't know," said Larcher bluntly; "it is all Greek to me."

"I can explain," said Pess feverishly. "This Grain, having committed suicide, is an earth-bound spirit, and when I surrendered my will to those on the other side he came to speak to Mrs. Baltin, who was the cause of his death. He never came before, and when he did come on the occasion when you were present, Chris, I did not know who was speaking through me."

"Well, go on. Tell me more," said Larcher sceptically. "If this spirit really did come, and if you really were ignorant, why should he seek to prevent my marriage to Alice and try to rob me of my inheritance? I never knew him; I have not harmed him. As he has been dead for forty years, why the deuce should he come out of his grave to play Old Harry with my affairs?"

"I don't know," said Pess miserably. "We never do know why spirits act in the odd ways in which they do act. All I know is that we have had several séances since you left the Manor House, Chris, and on each occasion Grain has used me as his mouthpiece. Mrs. Baltin took down what he said, and always he has urged her to will the property to me, so that I may be able to establish a kind of spiritual college in the Manor House: to teach mediums how to be receptive, to get messages, and to generally form a centre for the great work."

"The great rubbish!" said Chris angrily. "I don't know how much of all this you believe, Pess."

"I believe everything I say. I have reason to, Chris."

"Then the more shame to you, as a sensible man, to credit such stuff."

"Don't call it stuff, Chris," interposed Miss Hesmond quietly. "There is much truth in what Dr. Pess says"

"I don't believe in spirits," insisted Chris, with a frown.

"No, you don't," said Pess sarcastically. "You only believe in what you see or hear or touch or taste. Is that not so, Chris?"

"That is so," said the young man, with a shrug.

"Now hear me," observed Miss Hesmond in her quiet, homely way. "You know, Chris, that I am a reasonable woman, by no means hysterical, and am not likely to be swept away by any foolish emotion."

"You are always sensible," confessed Larcher immediately; "far more sensible than any man I have ever known."

"Good! Then you will be surprised to hear me say, and I say it deliberately, that there is truth in spiritism, and a very dangerous truth it is. If we try to communicate with the other world, we should, as St. John says, 'try the spirits whether they are of God.' That is the only safeguard. I ask you, Dr. Pess, if you have taken the apostle's advice?"

"No," admitted the little man reluctantly. "I never heard even that he gave any such advice."

"You will find it," continued Miss Hesmond, "in the First Epistle General of St. John, in the first verse of the fourth chapter. The way in which you try the spirits I shall leave you to read. But as you have *not* tried the spirits in this holy way so as to safeguard yourself, doctor, you are at the mercy of every lying thing on the other side. From out the Unseen evil creatures come to you, because you are not approaching the Unseen in the right way or in the right spirit of unselfishness."

"I am not selfish," cried Pess angrily. "If I were I should hold on to this property."

"You have not got it yet," said Larcher crisply.

"Let us continue," went on the old maid. "This

Grain departed from life filled with evil feelings of revenge against Mrs. Baltin. He said that he would return, if possible, to work her ill, and he has done so. In giving up your body to Grain, doctor, you are doing a dangerous thing, as this wicked spirit will only use that body to obtain his own ends."

"What are his own ends?"

"I have told you. He wishes to harm Mrs. Baltin, who drove him to his death by her heartless conduct."

"So far as she has taken down what was said through me, Grain does not appear to wish her any harm," protested Pess, distressed. "He does not approve of the marriage of Chris and Miss Dene, as he says that it will lead to disaster, and he wishes the property to come to me to forward the great cause. That is all."

"Yes," said Miss Hesmond dryly, "that is all, and quite enough. Grain is not so foolish as to intimate to the woman he hates what his plans are. But all that he is doing is meant to bring about a certain situation which will be harmful to Mrs. Baltin. Be advised, doctor. Refuse to sit again. Decline to allow this revengeful spirit to control you. Warn Mrs. Baltin against him and against her tamperings with the unseen world. Only in that way will you and she escape danger."

"What danger?" demanded Pess angrily.

"I don't know. But harm will come to her through your surrendering your body to this dead-and-gone Grain, and harm will come to you for the same reason. I advise you to induce Mrs. Baltin to give up her necromancy, and ask her to be reconciled with Chris here. Then he can marry Alice, and enter into his heritage when his aunt passes over. Otherwise——"

"Well, then?" said Pess quickly, springing to his feet. "Otherwise——"

"You must face the consequences, whatever they may be. I told Mrs. Baltin so yesterday."

"I shall not give up my faith in my spirit guides," said the doctor, with a determined look on his face, "nor shall I ask Mrs. Baltin to do so. If she does leave the property to me, I shall make it over to Chris. But if he will take my advice he will obey his aunt, and then all will be well. Grain says that nothing but trouble will come of this marriage."

"Tell Grain to mind his own business and stay in his grave," said Chris, rising also, and looking very cross. "And I'm about tired of all this uncanny business. I'm off to see the vicar and argue the matter out with him."

"And Jem Trap's chatter?"

"I can do nothing, doctor, save thrash him again if he goes on talking. If you meet him, tell him so; if I meet him, I shall send in his bill at once. Good-day. You can stay here and talk your spiritualist drivel to Miss Hesmond. I wonder so sensible a woman believes in such truck!"

The old maid laughed, by no means offended, as she always made allowance for ignorant people. Also it really was hard, as she knew, for a healthy and very material young man to credit that anything he did not see or hear, existed. He had no experience of such things himself, and did not believe, very naturally, in hearsay evidence. Therefore he went off to see the vicar, and Miss Hesmond turned her attention to Dr. Pess, who was greatly agitated. Somehow the doctor felt that there was trouble in the air, although he could not see that it was his meddling with the Unseen which was likely to bring about such trouble. A blind man knows nothing of the seven colours of the rainbow, and Pess was the blindest of the blind.

As it happened, the vicar was at home; and although

at first he refused to see the unwelcome visitor, he yielded in the long run to Larcher's request for an interview. Alice learned that Chris was at the door, and greatly wished to be present; but her father, in his austere way, sent her off upstairs, and Chris was conducted into the study when she was safely out of the way. He felt a trifle nervous, as Mr. Dene was an uncomfortable man to be with. However, as his whole future depended upon a successful interview, Larcher braced himself for the effort. After all, he was honest and very much in love, so he managed to present a bold front to his host, notwithstanding a certain sinking of the heart. To comfort himself he remembered the proverb, "None but the brave deserve the fair," and acted accordingly.

The Rev. John Dene was a tall and lean ascetic, with a severe, clean-shaven face as narrow as his understanding. His scanty locks were white, and his eyes were piercingly black, while he had a prominent nose, an obstinate chin, and a long upper lip. Arrayed from head to foot in black clothes, his tall figure and lean body made him look anything but cheerful. Dene, misreading religion, which teaches those who practise it to be happy, was a kill-joy and a marplot; also excessively bigoted, and desperately rude in his bigotry. Chris, in his smart riding suit, with his handsome face and general breezy air, looked quite human beside the funereal vicar. And Dene's speech corresponded to his dismal appearance.

"You wish to see me, Mr. Larcher?" he asked solemnly, after indicating that his visitor should be seated.

"I shouldn't be here if I did not," retorted Chris, whose sense of humour was awakened by this banal question. "I came to speak about Alice."

"Say what you have to say and go," said the vicar,

his severe face looking more uninviting than ever ;
“ but I had hoped that this unpleasant subject was likely to be avoided between us.”

“ Talking of Alice is not unpleasant to me, Mr. Dene.”

“ I allude to your desire to marry her. I said that I did not approve of the match because of your aunt’s unholy practices, and I told you not to come near this house. You have come in spite of my prohibition, and you intimate your desire to speak on this forbidden subject.”

“ I do ! ” said Chris bluntly, and thinking what an ass the man was to be so long-winded. “ I wish to tell you, sir, that I have quarrelled with my aunt because she—like yourself—does not approve of my love for Alice. I have been cut off with a shilling, or will be to-morrow, when she makes her new will. And that is likely to be made unless I agree to give up Alice, which I have no intention of doing. The property is to be left to Pess.”

“ To the doctor ? ” said the vicar, with a start, for this news was fresh.

“ Yes. She wants him to establish a kind of infernal college in the Manor House so as to promote intercourse with the next world.”

“ Monstrous ! ” Mr. Dene started to his feet.
“ Your aunt is mad ! ”

“ I wish she was mad,” said Chris dryly, “ for then I could upset this new will, if she makes it. Anyhow, that is how things stand. I have my practice as a veterinary surgeon ; I have youth and health, and nothing else. Will you give me Alice to be my wife ? ”

Bigot as he was, Dene could not help smiling at the demand, and, although he had no sense of humour, it was impossible for him to be angry with Chris. “ It is a strange question you ask, Mr. Larcher,” he said,

with twitching lips to prevent further smiling. "When you were your aunt's heir I refused my consent. Shall I not do so the more now that you are poor?"

"No!" said Chris bluntly. "I appeal to your sense of decency. I love Alice, and Alice loves me. We should be happy together, however poor. And let me remind you, Mr. Dene, that possible poverty will come simply from my great love in remaining true to her."

"That is meritorious," said the vicar gravely. "You certainly have the courage of your love. But you are wild and wayward."

"I was; I am not now. Miss Hesmond has reformed me."

"Miss Hesmond's views of religion are not mine," said Dene austere.

"What has that got to do with Alice or with me?"

"Nothing. I admit as much. But you are her friend, and will gradually become contaminated by her wild doctrines."

"If what you call her wild doctrines are likely to make me as good a man as she is a woman, why not?"

"On the other hand," continued the vicar, ignoring the remark, "you are the nephew of a lady who is given to invoking the dead."

"Again I ask, Mr. Dene, what that has to do with Alice or with me?"

"It is a case of Charybdis and Scylla, Mr. Larcher. You are between two women who do not hold my views."

"But, pardon me, Mr. Dene, is your brain the measure of the universe?"

The vicar coloured angrily. "You are insolent, Mr. Larcher."

"I don't mean to be insolent, sir, and I hope that I pay every respect to your cloth. Nevertheless, you are

not treating me fairly. I have made a great sacrifice to win your daughter, so I should have some sort of concession made on your part."

"The sacrifice you have made is entirely your own concern," said the clergyman coldly, "and my advice to you is to obey your aunt and give up my daughter, if only to prevent her leaving the property to that heretic Dr. Pess. A college of wickedness shall never be established in our midst while I have charge of the souls here. By consenting to your marriage with Alice, Mr. Larcher, I should be paving the way to the very thing I so strongly reprobate."

"Of course, I can see that. Yet my love for Alice——"

"Alice cannot live on love," retorted the vicar sharply. "I have other views for her. Mr. Felk wishes to marry her, and as he is a gentleman of honesty and position, and is rich, I have agreed that he should pay his addresses to Alice."

"As a parson you shouldn't trouble about riches."

"Am I to be taught my duty by you, Mr. Larcher?" said the vicar wrathfully. "I am not untouched by the appeal which you have made," he went on in a calmer tone, "and I have no wish to force my child into an unhappy marriage, especially as she has no mother. Mr. Larcher, if you will get your aunt to give up this intercourse with spirits, and if you can assure me that she will continue you as her heir, I shall consider the advisability of allowing you to see Alice."

"You will consent to our marriage?" cried Chris, jumping up, for he had not expected to find this dour man so reasonable.

"I don't say that. I wish Alice to marry Mr. Felk. However, I shall give you every opportunity of measuring yourself against him. I can say no more just now."

"Well, that's cricket!" said Chris, shaking the unwilling hand of the vicar.

"I promise nothing," said Dene austerely. "Go in peace."

And Chris did go with a feeling that Mr. Dene's bark was worse than his bite.

CHAPTER IX

MR. FELK

LARCHER was rather surprised at the vicar's sudden change of front. At the beginning of the interview he had refused to make any concession ; at the end he had conceded much. For it *was* much to Chris that he should be allowed free intercourse with Alice, as thus he could keep Felk at bay, and hold his own with the girl. Not that Larcher doubted Alice, but if he saw her only every now and then by stealth, while the stockbroker was permitted to visit the house, it was natural to suppose that the girl's resistance would be worn out gradually. Now the permission of the vicar placed the two lovers on an equal footing, and gave them the same chance of winning the prize. It was strange that Mr. Dene should yield so readily after the strong objections he had made, and Chris was too modest to ascribe this comfortable result to his own eloquence. There must be some other reason, he thought, for the readily-given permission, and what this reason was he desired to learn. Alice might be able to tell him, so Chris asked the parlourmaid to inform her that he was waiting for her in the vicarage garden. Having done this he went round the corner of the house to wait.

Before the vicar had laid his embargo on their love-making Alice and Chris had been accustomed to meet in a small arbour at the end of a laurel-bordered walk. It was this haven of refuge which Larcher sought, and here he sat down, fully expecting that Alice would come to him. His expectation was gratified without much delay, for shortly the girl came flying along between the neatly-trimmed hedges, with sparkling eyes and

outstretched arms. Chris rose to meet her, and in the tick of a clock the two were locked in a close embrace. What Chris said and Alice replied during the first rapturous moment was a trifle incoherent; but gradually they cooled down, and sat side by side, hand in hand, on the bench. Then they looked at one another and laughed.

"Fancy father behaving so sensibly!" said Alice, smoothing her hair, which was somewhat disordered by the ardour of the greeting.

"How do you know that he is behaving sensibly?" asked Chris artfully.

Alice stared at him. "Here we are together in this garden," she said gleefully, "and with father's permission. Don't you call that sensible for father to allow?"

"I do. But did he tell you that we could meet?"

"Oh, yes. Just when Jane gave me your message, and I was wondering how to get out of the house and meet you quietly, father came and told me that he did not mind my seeing you. Then he said that he was going to see your aunt, and I hurried down here as fast as I could."

"Your father has gone to see my aunt?" said Chris, with a start, and wholly ignoring the explanation, which seemed sufficiently clear. "Why?"

"I'm sure I don't know. He said he was going, and now he has gone. He left the house just after me. It is strange that father should go out to-day."

"To see my aunt?"

"Yes; and also because it is the first Monday in August."

"Why shouldn't the vicar go out on the first Monday in August?"

"Oh, Chris, how stupid you are! Why, it's Bank Holiday, and the village is crowded with trippers,

who come to see the village and the church. Father never approves of crowds and holiday-making, as he says there is always trouble in the end. Usually he stays at home when trippers come to Wichley. But he has gone out in spite of his opinion. It must be something very important that is taking him to see Mrs. Baltin. What is it?"

"Really, Alice, I don't know," said the young man thoughtfully; "no more than I know why your father should change his mind about my seeing you. When I spoke to him he was dead-set against me, and declined to yield an inch. But before we parted he yielded several inches."

"Well, that's my doing," said Miss Dene complacently.

"Your doing, darling?"

Alice nodded, with an important look. "Last night I told father that I would not stand it, and threatened to run away and marry you."

"Darling"—Chris caught her to his breast—"would you have done that?"

"Yes, I certainly would have done that, you silly boy! Don't I love you with all my heart and soul?"

"You do! But you don't love me as much as I love you."

"I love you a thousand times more, Chris! There, don't kiss me again, as we have to talk sensibly. Do be good! Oh, how silly you are!"

"I am good," mumbled Chris, kissing her hands since she refused her lips. "I am an angel of goodness. Go on and tell me everything."

"I am trying to, only you won't leave me alone. There, put your arm round me and let me talk." Alice nestled in her lover's embrace, and became serious. "I know you think that father is a strong, resolute man, Chris. But he isn't. He is a reed

painted to resemble iron. When he gets in a rage he can fight."

"Every one can," interpolated Larcher softly.

"Do be quiet and let me speak. Well, when father gets over his rage he can't hold out if one worries him steadily. Ever since he parted us I have gone on worrying him, and last night we had it out. Father stormed, but I stood firm, and in the end he gave way, as I knew he would."

"He has only given way this much, dear—that we are allowed to meet. But he won't give way over our marriage."

"Oh, yes, he will in the end. We have gained so much, and will gain more if we wait patiently. And father is fond of me even though he tries to bully me into doing what he wants. Besides, he saw that I was in earnest."

"And you were?"

"Chris, do you think that I have no will of my own? Because I am not tall, and look pale, and don't rage, do you believe that I am a meek, mild person, likely to be sat upon? You don't know me if you think that."

"I think you are an angel," murmured Chris, kissing her hair.

"How weak that sounds!" retorted Miss Dene, with a shrug. "Angels seem to be such goody-goody persons when we see them simpering in pictures. No, Chris, I am not an angel, but a girl who loves you very, very much."

"Darling!"

"Don't! Well, then, I had made up my mind, and I told father that if he went on behaving like a tyrant I would run away to Miss Hesmond. I know that she desires our marriage, and will stand by me until I am safely your wife. I defied father, Chris, and I intended to defy him."

"You heroine! You Boadicea! You Joan of Arc!"

Alice burst out laughing. "How silly you are, Chris! Well, father yielded, and said that we could see one another, but that he must be the one to tell you. I mean he said that he must be the one to explain. I'm getting so mixed with excitement that I don't know what I'm saying."

"Well, he saw me, and he has given his permission," said Chris, soothing her, for certainly she was very excited, as she declared. "But that Felk man?"

"Oh, he is coming here to-day to afternoon tea. He will be here in a few minutes, and I told Jane to bring him and the tea out here."

"I don't want to see him," said Chris in a grumpy manner.

"Chris, you really are trying! Father has done something to please us, so we must do something to please father. That is only fair."

"I don't see that my meeting Felk can please the vicar."

"It will, though." Alice coloured a trifle. "You see, Chris, Mr. Felk says that he loves me as you do."

"That's impossible. No one can love you as I do."

"I don't mean that exactly. He is in love with me, as you are. Now do you understand? Well, then, father says that he is to have the same chance as you, and that the two of you should meet so as to know one another. Of course, I told father that in any case I should marry you and you only. All the same, I agreed with father that you should meet Mr. Felk to-day. If you had not come, father would have sent for you. Now, Chris, do be nice to Mr. Felk."

"How can I be nice, as you call it, to a man who wants to take my pearl?"

"Oh dear me!" Alice grew impatient. "Can't you trust your pearl? If I have held to you while all this trouble has existed, won't I hold to you now that things are easier?"

"Yes, yes! I am sure you will."

"Then be good and nice and agreeable to Mr. Felk."

"I'll try. But if he makes eyes at you——"

"Chris, don't be vulgar. Mr. Felk is a gentleman, and doesn't make eyes."

Larcher shifted his ground. "I don't know why your father wants you to marry the man," he said moodily. "After all, the vicar knows little about him, as he has only been here for a few months. He may be a swindler."

"Chris, that is not fair. So far as we know, Mr. Felk is quite decent. He is a stockbroker, and is rich. But he is away a great deal," went on Miss Dene in a thoughtful manner, "and I am bound to say there is something mysterious about him."

"I don't think your father is very wise, Alice, to wish you to marry a man of whom he knows so little."

"Oh, my dear"—Alice became quite motherly—"father is a child in many ways, and I love him all the more because he is. He gets cross over things, just like a baby in a paddy, and thinks that he is strong because he rages. It is only since he stopped our meetings, Chris, that I have found out how truly weak poor dear father is. And for that reason I fought last night to win so much."

"I hope you will win the rest, and get him to consent to our marriage," said the young man hopefully. "Perhaps he has gone to see my aunt about her craze for spiritualism. If she gives in to him, he will then allow us to marry. But she won't. My aunt is no

reed painted to resemble iron. She is iron through and through. She'll make that new will and leave the property to Pess or I'm a Dutchman."

"Why don't you call and expostulate, Chris?" asked Alice, who knew all about Mrs. Baltin's views, thanks to the vicarage servants, who had heard Jem talking.

"No," said the young man firmly, "I shan't enter the manor again until my aunt sends for me. I am not going to eat humble pie to her even to get what is my own. If you love me, Alice, you will marry me, poor as I am."

"Of course I'll marry you," she said, putting her arms round his neck; "but if Mrs. Baltin would be sensible it would make things easier."

"If by sensible you mean her giving up spiritualism and agreeing to our marriage, she never will be sensible, my dear. There doesn't exist in the wide, wide world a more obstinate, pigheaded old woman."

"Don't call her names, Chris."

"Well, I won't. But she is treating me badly, you know, Alice, and I'm only a human being after all. I say, who is this?"

"Mr. Felk. You might have guessed. Now do be nice to him." And Alice rose to greet a slim, dapper gentleman who was being led down the laurel path by Jane, all smirks and smiles. The vicarage servants liked Mr. Felk, as he was very liberal with his money.

"How are you, Mr. Felk?" said Alice, holding out her hand affably. "This is Mr. Larcher. Jane, bring out the tea at once."

"And Mother Corn, miss?" said Jane, lingering. "She is in the kitchen, and wants to see you."

"I'm busy—no, stay, Jane." Alice reflected that the old woman might lessen the tension between her lovers if she came later. "Tell Mother Corn to come here in half an hour—no, in a quarter of an hour. Do get

the tea. I am sure, Mr. Felk, you are dying for a cup. And you, Chris? "

"I am both thirsty and hungry," admitted Chris, and threw himself full-length on the grass, while Felk took his seat decorously on the bench beside Alice.

This was rather a concession on the part of Chris; but a mere glance at his rival showed him that he had nothing to fear. This was the first time Mr. Larcher had seen Felk at close quarters, and when he looked at the undersized little man, so scrupulously dressed and groomed, he felt rather a contempt for him. Yet he respected him secretly in a way, as he had seen Felk master a particularly restive horse. In spite of Felk's waxed moustache and dandified dress and general air of being a carpet knight, there was something in his eyes which impressed the young man. All the same, he did not think that Alice would ever look twice at such an effeminate suitor. Felk might be strong in some unknown way—his eyes showed as much—but, like all women, Alice would probably only judge him by externals. In this opinion Chris was wrong, as women do not judge entirely by outward looks. But Larcher was very young in some ways—very young indeed.

"It is truly delightful here," observed Mr. Felk in a mild, small voice; "but then, all Wichley is delightful."

"You have only been here a few months, have you not?" asked Chris, lying indolently on the grass and chewing a blade of the same.

"Only a few months, Mr. Larcher. I knew Mr. Dene many years ago, as he was acquainted with my father, and I met him again last year. He told me of this old-world village buried in the midst of modern suburbs, and the description so fascinated me that I determined to take a house in the vicinity."

"That is the red-brick house near Miss Hesmond's?" said Alice, nodding directly to Jane, who had arrived with the tea-table and a boy bearing a tray.

"Yes. I have heard of Miss Hesmond, as I have heard of you, Mr. Larcher. But as I am often absent on business I have not had much chance of making friends with any one here. Beyond the vicar and you, Miss Dene, I really know no one."

"You are a stockbroker?" inquired Larcher, staring.

Felk turned his pale blue eyes, so strangely powerful, on the speaker and assented gravely. "I am a stockbroker—amongst other things," he remarked. "I suppose, Mr. Larcher, you think that after my stock-broking business I should come down, like other business men, every evening?"

"No. Really," protested Chris, sitting up, while Alice poured out the tea, "I do not think anything about it."

"I thought you did," murmured Felk mildly, but there was a kind of challenge in his tone. "Thank you, Miss Dene." He accepted a cup of tea. "You are the squire of this place, are you not, Mr. Larcher?"

"Oh, that's only what the villagers call me. My aunt, Mrs. Baltin, is the lady of the manor, and you can call her the squire."

"But when she dies—and she is very old, I hear—you will be the squire?"

"Yes," said Chris curtly, and wondered why Felk was asking these questions.

Felk went on still mildly talking and stirring his tea, quite oblivious, as it would seem, of Larcher's curt answer. "I have always wished to be a squire myself," he said softly. "To go to a public school, and afterwards to Oxford or Cambridge, and to return

to take up the duties of squire in a lovely old house such as your aunt has, Mr. Larcher, is, to my mind, an ideal life. But my father was a doctor, and poor, so I did not receive a particularly good education. I have had to fight my way through life."

"All the more credit to you," said Alice soothingly.

"Thank you for the compliment, Miss Dene," said the little man gratefully. "I hope you will always continue to think well of me."

Chris looked puzzled. To a casual spectator Felk looked singularly weak and effeminate; but closer observation revealed the possession of some latent strength which he could exercise when he chose to put it forth. His pale eyes seemed to be all over the place, and certain gleams in them assured Chris that Felk was not a man to be trifled with. He was polite and well bred, agreeable and amiable; but Larcher did not like him, nor did he wholly trust him. There was certainly a mystery about Mr. Felk; but what it was Chris could not say. However, feeling that he was in a dangerous neighbourhood, the young man was as silent as Alice was, and Felk had most of the conversation to himself.

"When I have more time," he went on in his lady-like little voice, "I hope to make the acquaintance of your aunt, Mr. Larcher. The vicar, who knew my father, can vouch for my respectability."

Alice laughed. "There is likely to be no question of that," she said, stumbling over her words and framing her sentence ungrammatically in her hurry.

"Thank you again, Miss Dene," said Felk, with a grateful look; "but, as I say, Mr. Larcher, I hope to meet your aunt and see over that lovely old house. I am so interested in old mansions and in old furniture."

"And in old ladies also, I hope," said Chris rather

sarcastically. "You will find Mrs. Baltin wonderfully charming and clever."

"So I have heard," assented Felk, taking no notice of the sarcasm. "She is a great organizer, I believe, and rules this village in a way worthy of one occupying a wider sphere. Does she throw open her grounds to the populace on days like this, Mr. Larcher?"

"No. My aunt has no love for Bank Holidays or for the people who make them hideous with their noise. The Manor House is surrounded by a high brick wall, and no one dares to get over it."

"Jem Trap dared to do so, I hear," said Alice, with a smile.

"I don't think he'll venture there again. My aunt was one too many for him, and he threatened all kinds of revenge."

"Dear me, how dreadful," said Mr. Felk, interested, "and how dangerous! I know the man you mean, Mr. Larcher—a big, burly, truculent fellow. I do hope that your aunt will be careful. He might do her an injury."

"Mrs. Baltin is quite safe, Mr. Felk. No one will dare to tackle her."

"I suppose she has made herself safe, Mr. Larcher. Doubtless she has spring-traps and dogs in her park?"

"No," said Chris, amused; "there is no need for my aunt to take such precautions. The mere terror of her name is a safeguard. When you meet her, Mr. Felk, you will find her a kind of Elizabeth."

"Charming! Charming! One does so like strength of character. You live at the Manor House, of course. Mr. Larcher?"

"No," said Chris, again curtly, and again wondering why Mr. Felk asked all these questions.

"No, no! Of course," murmured the little man hastily. "I forgot. My valet overheard that

poacher Trap talking in the public-house last night, and he said that you had left the Manor House, and also he said—oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Larcher, I should not comment on your private affairs.”

“It seems that my private affairs are public property,” snapped Chris, with a frown. And he wondered if Mr. Felk intended to be impertinent.

“That is the worst of living in a village, Mr. Larcher. Now in London one can act as one pleases without having one’s doing canvassed by one’s neighbours. However, it does not much matter. People will talk. By the way, Miss Dene,” said Felk, turning the conversation, perhaps because he saw that he had made a mistake, “I hope your father will be here soon. I wish to see him.”

“He has gone to see Mrs. Baltin, Mr. Felk, and will not be back for some time.”

“Oh, then I shall take my leave earlier than perhaps is quite polite,” said the little man, putting his cup and saucer on the bamboo table. “I can stroll towards the Manor House, and perhaps may meet Mr. Dene when he comes out. We can walk back together, and then can have our talk. Your father will be glad of a companion when the streets of the village are so noisy with these Bank Holiday trippers.”

“My father is never afraid, if that is what you mean, Mr. Felk.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” said Felk, with a surprised look in his eyes. “I only mean that Mr. Dene will be glad of my companionship. I am sure he is bold, although it is positively dangerous when one thinks of the scoundrels who come down to quiet places like this on Bank Holidays—thieves, pick-pockets, burglars, and such-like creatures.”

“Are you afraid that your house may be broken into?” said Chris, with an air of contempt.

"No," said the little man, with a glance that made Chris see there was no reason for him to speak contemptuously. "I can look after myself, Mr. Larcher. I have my man Walters also, and he is very brave. But I wonder that Mrs. Baltin does not fear burglars, seeing that her house is filled with treasures."

"My aunt fears nothing. Oh"—here Chris jumped up—"here's Mother Corn."

Down the path came a brisk and vigorous old woman, arrayed in a blue velvet second-hand dress, incongruously matched with a white linen sun-bonnet and a gaudy tartan shawl the worse for wear. She was very ancient, yet quite unbent by her weight of years. Her face was brown and withered and very wrinkled, while her mouth was toothless, and her hair—what could be seen of it—white and scanty. But she had two dark eyes filled with the fire of vitality, and having that peculiar look in them which showed that she had gipsy blood in her veins. She was older than Mrs. Baltin, yet quite as upright and quite as self-possessed. But her manner was much more agreeable, and she looked quite a merry old blackguard of a woman.

"Dear me, lovey," she said to Miss Dene, and putting down her basket, "I do hope as you'll not mind me coming here when you are a-sitting with your gentlemen. But I am glad to find you here, Master Chris. I was wondering, when I heard as you were here, if you'd ask your aunt to let me come into the park and get them herbs I want."

"My aunt won't have anything to do with me just now, Mrs. Corn," said Chris in a quiet way, "as you must know, if Jem has told you anything."

"He hev told me everything, Master Chris; Jem always does. So you ain't made it up yet? Ah! your aunt was always a masterful lady, my dear.

But them as is masterful may find others as is more so. You can be as cliver as most," concluded Mother Corn briskly, "but not as cliver as all."

"What do you mean?" asked Alice sharply.

"Lord, deary, what should I mean but what I say? I did think as Master Chris would have made it up with her, and I want his good word. Failing that, lovey, I want yours, for them herbs I must hev, and the park's the only place they grow in."

"I can't help you," said Alice, with a shrug; "Mrs. Baltin won't listen to me."

"Then I'll see her myself and get them herbs," said Mother Corn defiantly, "for the good Lord He gave grasses and such-like for all and not for one. And I do hope, deary, as you and Master Chris will make it up with that masterful lady, and be happy ever afterwards."

"Are you telling the fortune of Miss Dene and Mr. Larcher?" asked Felk in a sudden way, and displaying much interest.

The old woman looked at him piercingly. "I know their fortune, my good gentleman," she said, after a pause. "Trouble's before them, and dark clouds is around them. But the sunshine is beyond, and will break forth unexpected. Keep up your hearts, dearies," she added, addressing the lovers. "'Twill be sharp but short this sorrow, and in the end joy will come up through the gates of the dawn. Ah, yis, be sure of that."

"I don't believe in fortune-telling, Mrs. Corn," said Chris, sitting up, with a flush, and annoyed that she should speak so freely before Felk.

"And what of that, Master Chris? It don't make no difference. There be some as the veil of the future is thinner to than 'tis to others. What I say I say, and all is well with you arter trouble short and sharp.

As to this gentleman——” She fixed her eyes again on Felk.

“I don’t want my fortune told,” said the little man, his pink-and-white complexion becoming crimson.

“Some hes to hev fortunes told by way of warning, my good gentleman,” said Mother Corn, with the air of an oracle. “The air in this place is bad fur you, and a journey to furrein parts will do your health good.”

“Indeed!” said Felk, fixing his pale eyes on her as piercingly as she fixed her dark ones on him. “How do you know?”

“I hev said what I hev said,” retorted Mother Corn uneasily, and turned away.

CHAPTER X

SARAH JUNDY'S NEWS

WITH the shrewd intuition of a woman, Alice had read her father's true character correctly. He *was* weak, but veiled his weakness under a show of temper, or by displaying obstinacy on all and every occasion. The knowledge that he had not a strong will made him all the more angry and dogged when he felt his resistance giving way. In the end, when faced steadily, he always did give way, and, guessing this, his daughter had won her victory. Mr. Dene was also narrow in his views, and therefore unoriginal. He held by what he had learned at school and college, so was merely an educated parrot, who taught like a parrot—that is, he repeated what had been repeated to him, and disliked all innovations, which he considered sinful. Being thus wanting in elasticity of mind, the man never progressed himself, nor did he help any other person to progress. As a matter of fact, he was dead against all progress, and had that priestly spirit of intolerance which looked askance at anything new. As he was to-day, so would Mr. Dene be to-morrow; and as he was to-morrow, so he ever would be until the end of the chapter. It was no wonder that people found him trying.

As he had been forced to give way to Alice because of her persistence, Mr. Dene sought to gratify his obstinacy in another direction, and was, therefore, bent upon calling Mrs. Baltin to order. She was seeking to know what he did not know, and wished to learn what he, as her pastor, could not teach. Hitherto the vicar had said very little about the old

dame's heresies, and had contented himself with parting the lovers. Now they had come together again, so Mr. Dene was determined to tackle Mrs. Baltin forthwith and rebuke her for her iniquities. Like all weak men, he loved to meddle with what did not concern him, and to tyrannize if possible. The spiritism of Pess and his patroness afforded the vicar an opportunity of soothing his wounded pride, which had suffered by the defeat Alice had inflicted. Therefore he stalked through the village, intending to call on Mrs. Baltin and give his unasked opinion of her dangerous doings. Also, in justice to Mr. Dene, it must be said that he intended to remonstrate with the old lady regarding her behaviour towards Christopher. It was not right that the lawful heir should be disinherited, while it was terrible to think that Pess should be given the chance of founding an infernal college in the parish. Never should the Manor House be a seat of Satan if Mr. Dene could help it.

The village buzzed with crowds of lively people, who came by rail, in chars-à-banc, and on bicycles to enjoy themselves. Wichley was old-fashioned enough to be hundreds of miles away in the country, yet was so near Town that it was cheap and easy to get to it. Therefore it was a favourite holiday resort for those trippers who could not afford to go farther afield, and on high-days and holidays the villagers made a great deal of money. The place was like a fair, as noisy, as lively, as gay, and as rowdy. Mr. Dene disapproved of such goings-on, and both in and out of the pulpit had proclaimed his objection to such gatherings. Needless to say, all his rebukes fell on deaf ears; the Wichley folk were not to be deterred from making money by priestly injunctions, and the day had passed when these could

be enforced. So the High Street and all other streets of the village were crowded, the public-houses were full, and the shops were well patronized. With a frown at the levity of the mob, and almost deafened by noise, Mr. Dene stalked gloomily through the merry-makers on his way to the Manor House. And on his way he rehearsed his speech to Mrs. Baltin.

On arriving at the stately iron gates of the place, Mr. Dene glanced right and left to note the high brick wall which encircled the park. It was meant to keep out trespassers, but, like the Great Wall of China, was more for show than for use—that is, boys and grown men would climb over it to steal fruit and flowers and to snare rabbits. Mrs. Baltin always made an example of such poachers, but in vain. The depredations still continued, the more so because the old tyrant was so thoroughly hated. However, the vicar did not think of these trifles, as his mind was fully occupied with the coming interview. He knew Mrs. Baltin of old, and anticipated a troublesome discourse. However, his native obstinacy came to his aid, and he entered the gates and walked up the avenue with the determination of a man leading a forlorn hope. And this attitude was the more to be admired as Mrs. Baltin was by no means an easy person to deal with. Mr. Dene felt like Napoleon, and wondered if he would find Austerlitz or Waterloo. He sat on a garden-seat for some time to gain courage.

It seemed likely to be his Waterloo, for on sending in his name, as is customary, although he thought it was a risk to signify his presence, a message was brought back by the butler to say that Mrs. Baltin refused to see him. The vicar was not surprised, and meekly—on the face of it, at all events—accepted his defeat. But when the door was closed he made his way along the side of the house in the direction

of the drawing-room. The long, low casements, muffled in ivy, were wide open, and, hearing voices, Mr. Dene paused to listen. Also he peeped in, and watched his opportunity to interfere. The vicar was a gentleman, and, as one, would not have acted in this way. But he was also a fiery bigot, who thought that Mrs. Baltin's soul was in danger. Therefore he had not the slightest compunction in descending to be an eavesdropper. The lady of the manor and Dr. Pess were cheek by jowl in the drawing-room, and by their conversation the vicar verified the adage that "listeners hear no good of themselves." It was a painful situation, but Mr. Dene endured it like a martyr, because he truly believed that he was about to do good.

"Such impertinence!" Mrs. Baltin was saying when he caught the first words. "I wonder he dared to come! I know quite well what he is after, the meddlesome creature."

"Do you think that he has come to plead for Chris?" asked the doctor.

"Yes. He pretends that he does not wish Alice to marry the boy; but if he can only get me to keep Christopher as my heir, he will consent to the marriage quickly enough."

"I wish you *would* keep Chris as your heir, Mrs. Baltin," said Pess miserably. "I do not want your money."

"Grain says that you are to have the money, and have it you shall," said Mrs. Baltin sharply. "I expect Grain has learned wisdom on the purgatorial plane, and wants to help me to do good. He was a fool to kill himself, and behaved very unfairly to me in doing so. I am glad he has repented."

"Grain may not mean so kindly as you think," urged Pess earnestly. "You know quite well that

those who are dead do not change their character when they pass over. If the man hated you when he was alive, you may be sure that he hates you now that he is dead. His desire that I shall have this money to found a spiritualistic college will lead to trouble. Better let Chris have what is his by rights, and plead with the vicar that the marriage should take place."

"Plead! I plead?" cried Mrs. Baltin, in high displeasure. "What are you thinking of? I have always had my own way, and I always shall. Of course, if Grain told me otherwise I should do what he says, as, being a spirit, he is possessed of more knowledge than I have. Now that I have sent away that meddlesome parson, doctor, let us have a sitting. If Grain still advises what he has advised, I shall alter my will to-morrow when my solicitor comes down."

"And if Grain changes his mind?"

"He is not likely to. But if he does I shall send for Chris and tell him that he can return here as my heir."

"What about the marriage?"

"We can talk of that later. If I decide upon the marriage Mr. Dene will have to give way. He is as weak as water and as silly as a donkey."

This was too much for Dene, who was not exactly as meek as Moses. "It's not true," he cried, thrusting his head through the casement. "I am strong in righteousness, and, come what may, I refuse to allow my daughter to marry the nephew of a notorious infidel."

Mrs. Baltin started from her chair, grasped her stick firmly, and glared at the vicar like a basilisk. "How dare you?" she cried furiously. "Is this the behaviour of a gentleman?"

"It is the behaviour of one who wishes to save your soul alive."

"How dare you?" cried Mrs. Baltin again, and shook her stick at him. "Go away, or the doctor shall drive you away."

Dene glanced down at his own lean figure and then at the rotund proportion of the worthy doctor, who was perspiring with fright. "I think I can deal with Dr. Pess, madam," he said contemptuously.

"I'll send for the policeman."

"He is busy attending to the holiday-makers in the village, and can't come."

"I'll order the servants to turn you out of the grounds. I'll summons you for trespass. I'll write to your bishop. I'll—I'll——" Words failed her, and she again shook her stick at him furiously.

"Go away! Go away!" Pess implored the vicar, for he was quite alarmed by the fierce wrath of Mrs. Baltin. "She will fall down in a fit if you don't go."

"Better for her to fall down in a fit than to speak with devils, as you both intend to do when I go," said Mr. Dene dauntlessly. "It is of no use. I have come to speak, and speak I shall."

"Then speak," said Mrs. Baltin, suddenly becoming her cold, tyrannical self, as she saw that Dene was determined. "What you say doesn't matter, and later I shall punish you for this insolence."

"Respect my cloth, madam," said Dene sternly and loudly. "Contempt of the servants of the Church leads to punishment now and hereafter."

"Oh, bother your jargon!" said Mrs. Baltin rather vulgarly. "What have you come to say? Say it and go. I'll deal with you later."

"I have come to protest against your disinheriting your nephew."

"What did I tell you?" said the old woman to

Pess, who wiped his perspiring brow and nodded. "He wants Christopher to be rich so that this marriage may take place."

"You are quite wrong," said the vicar coldly. "If Mr. Larcher was as rich as Solomon I should refuse to allow my child to become his wife. He is a profligate."

"He is not," said Mrs. Baltin indignantly. "Christopher has offended me, and has behaved badly; but that is my business. He is not a profligate; he is as good-living a man as you are, and is twice as sensible. And if you dare to speak of my nephew in that way I shall leave him the property and see myself that he marries the girl."

"Oh, indeed!" sneered Dene, with a shrug. "And what about the advice given to you by the demon you consult?"

"What demon?"

"That one called Grain; the demon who was once your lover, and whom you drove to commit suicide."

Mrs. Baltin gasped with rage. "Oh, if I were only a man," she moaned, "to strike you to the ground for these insults! How dare you listen?"

"Oh, I did not learn about Grain from listening. Jem Trap overheard the tale, and he has spread it broadcast. Your iniquity is all over the village."

"Go, go!" cried Pess, running to the casement, for Mrs. Baltin turned so white and trembled so greatly that he feared what might happen. "You will kill her if you talk further. She is old and frail."

"She is old enough to know better," said Dene, becoming more obstinate than ever; "and if she dies it will be better for her than to continue living in sin. For this consultation with devils is sin, and you, Dr. Pess, are the high-priest of Satan."

"If you don't go," gasped Pess, clenching his fists, "I shall come out and do my best to thrash you."

"Let him be," said Mrs. Baltin unexpectedly, and in a feeble voice. "So many insults have been hurled at me that one more or less does not matter. Go on, Mr. Dene. I congratulate the Church on the good breeding of her servants."

"Sarcasm is lost on me," cried the vicar, fully believing himself to be doing his duty. "Woe to you both, for you sin against your Maker. You war against the Light; you seek counsel of devils. Thanks to the advice of the presiding demon, Grain, you have wickedly turned your nephew out of doors. Woe to you, woman, and woe to this priest of Satan who encourages you in evil!"

Mrs. Baltin did not answer a word, and signed to Pess that he should also remain silent, although he was panting to speak. With her chin resting on her hands, and her hands on the top of her stick, the old woman listened quite unmoved. Dene had already insulted her beyond measure, and she had got over her first outburst of anger.

"Woe!" said the vicar, again regretting that the difficulties of his position, looking in through the casement, prevented him from using his hands freely. "Your footsteps go down to hell. You call upon the dead—the evil dead who wish to work harm to the inhabitants of earth. As your pastor, as your well-wisher, as one who stands to you in the place of a master, I forbid you to traffic with the accuser of the brethren!"

Still Mrs. Baltin held her peace, which was the best thing she could do, as the vicar began to falter. For want of the fuel supplied by opposition it was hard for him to keep up the fire of his anger, and his voice quavered and shook, and gradually died away. Pess, seeing this, smiled meaningly, whereat Dene grew eloquent again.

"Dare to leave the money to this spy of the devil," he cried, addressing the silent woman, "dare to permit him to establish a school of evil in this village, and I will carry the matter into the law courts, into the House of Commons, into the House of Lords. I shall carry it, if needs be, to the throne."

Again he was met by a dead wall of silence, and really was unable to continue. Mrs. Baltin was too much for him, as she was too much for every one. The vicar decided to retire as gracefully as he could, but fired a parting shot of a rather spiteful nature. "If anything," he said, "would make me allow my daughter to marry your nephew and reform him, it would be your wicked behaviour towards him. Already I have given my consent that the young couple should meet again, and it may be that I shall marry them in my own church myself. Thus you will see, madam, that it is not money I seek. I see you are obdurate and impenitent, so I deliver you and your evil companion over to the wiles of Satan. Have you anything to say?"

Mrs. Baltin had nothing to say, nor, by her direction, had Pess. Silently the two culprits, as Dene considered them to be, stared at the vicar, and finally stared him out of countenance. Mumbling a few words about his duty, Mr. Dene withdrew from the casement, and came face to face with Felk. So astonished was the clergyman at seeing the stockbroker that he could not say a word.

"I apologize for following you here," said Felk in his meek little voice, and looking here, there, and everywhere, "but I thought that as you were visiting this place you might introduce me to Mrs. Baltin."

"I introduce no one to Mrs. Baltin," said the vicar grimly. "I have more regard for the souls of my friends than to do so."

"Yes, I thought that your voice sounded somewhat angry," remarked Felk, with an air of innocence. "But why should you be angry at spiritualism, as I gather you are? There is no harm in it." He raised his voice. "Indeed, if Mrs. Baltin wishes another to join her circle, I am willing to do so."

While the vicar gasped at this speech Pess came to the casement and looked out indignantly. "Go away, Mr. Dene, and take your noisy friends away," he said imperatively. "You have made Mrs. Baltin ill, and have done quite enough mischief. Go away, or I shall not answer for the consequences with regard to the enfeebled body of my patient."

"Your victim, rather," said Dene bitterly. "I am going. Having done my duty and delivered my message of warning, I am going. Come, Mr. Felk."

"One moment." Felk ran to the casement, and came face to face with the doctor, looking distressed and nervous. "I apologize for my intrusion. My trespass was not meant wrongly. I respect Mrs. Baltin. I wish to make my apologies in person to Mrs. Baltin."

All the time Felk was speaking he was trying to look into the room over the shoulder of Pess. But this was difficult to see clearly, as the doctor kept dodging from one side to the other, so that Felk could see very little. Finally, finding that the new-comer would go on babbling and peeping, Pess sharply closed the casement and drew the curtains. The smart little stockbroker, being thus abruptly dismissed, turned mournfully towards the vicar.

"I fear that Mrs. Baltin will never receive me now," he said sadly, "yet my intentions were of the best. What a lovely old house!" He passed along the front and side examining the walls and the casements in an admiring manner.

"Come away," said Dene sharply; "there is no need for us to remain here. What I have mentioned to that wicked old woman may do her good."

"It is more likely to make her obstinate," said Felk dryly. "I heard a good deal of your discourse, as I left the vicarage and afternoon tea early in order to catch you up. You must have lingered in the village."

"I lingered," said Dene austerely, "to look at the unthinking crowd dancing down the primrose path to hell. I also sat for some time on a garden-seat."

"How amusing!" said Felk, with a little cackle of laughter, and looked back at the house. Then he looked to either side of the avenue, examined the gates when they arrived at them, and gazed at the tall red-brick wall. "It really is a lovely place," ended the stockbroker, with a sigh, when he was outside the domain of Mrs. Baltin. "I do so regret that I cannot make the acquaintance of the owner. Let us hope that Mr. Larcher will inherit, and then doubtless I will be invited to visit him here."

"What do you know about Larcher's inheritance?" asked the vicar sharply.

Felk opened his china-blue eyes. "Why, my man Walters goes to the public-house frequently, and hears all the gossip of the village. That poacher Trap said a great deal last night about what was taking place. Then I had some conversation with your daughter and Mr. Larcher, and, finally, I overheard much of what you said through the window to Mrs. Baltin."

"You should not listen to such things."

"Well, you listened yourself," said the stockbroker somewhat maliciously, as they entered the High Street.

"It was my duty to listen," retorted the vicar coolly. "I do not regret having done so. I am a gentleman, but I am also one who desires to save souls."

"I see. One can't be a gentleman and a saver of souls at the same time," said Felk, with an innocent expression.

"Let us talk on other and more profitable subjects," said Mr. Dene, secretly surprised to find that there was so much of the cat in Mr. Felk's disposition. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."

"Well, I only hope that all these scallawags here won't bring evil to Mrs. Baltin," said Felk, surveying the noisy crowd.

"Why should they?" asked Dene, surprised.

"Well, there are many scamps here, you know, and that lovely old house, filled with treasure, is quite undefended. I notice, also, from the glimpse I caught of Mrs. Baltin over that man's shoulder, that she wears many valuable diamonds. That in itself is enough to tempt hard-up people."

"Your warning is well meant," said Dene stiffly, "but unnecessary, Mr. Felk. I have no reason to believe that Mrs. Baltin is in danger save from her own evil nature. The house has a high wall round it, the village policeman is on night duty regularly, and there are bolts and bars on all the windows."

Felk was silenced, as, after all, it was none of his business to warn Mrs. Baltin or the vicar. He walked beside his companion through the merry crowd, smiling in sympathy as much as the parson frowned in disapproval. When they reached the end of the village and came near to the church, Dene stopped to address a cheery, merry-faced little woman, who was gaily arrayed in holiday garb, and carried a basket on her arm.

"Mrs. Pike! Mrs. Pike!" said the vicar seriously. "I did not expect to see such a staunch churchwoman as you are joining in the hollow laughter of the foolish crowd."

Mrs. Pike dropped a curtsy. "Why, bless you, sir, I've only been out to get something tasty for Mr. Larcher's dinner. I'm just on my way home, and as it's getting near six I must hurry."

"That is right. Stay indoors, and pray that the people may come to church instead of going to fairs. Good-day! Good-day!" And Mr. Dene stalked on, followed by Felk, who sent a roguish look over his shoulder at the bewildered Mrs. Pike.

The little woman took some time to recover her breath, as she thought that the vicar's rebuke was quite undeserved. But it was characteristic of Mr. Dene's wrong way of doing things that he should be wanting in tact. Mrs. Pike looked after him indignantly, and went home seething with anger. She did not see by what right the vicar interfered when she was going about her lawful business, and gave her opinion freely to her lodger when he came home to dinner at seven o'clock. Chris laughed, and reminded her that Dene meant well, although his zeal sometimes outran his discretion. But this view did not tend to soothe the indignant Mrs. Pike.

"If folk minded their own business, sir," she said, when she was clearing away, "the world 'ud be a deal better. But there, sir, I shan't say a word more, as Miss Alice can't help having such a meddlesome pa."

"I don't see what it has to do with Miss Alice," said Chris dryly.

"Nothing, of course, sir. But what I meant to say, and what I do say, is as I know you will marry Miss Alice, and I don't want to say a word against her pa to you, as is all that is agreeable and gentlemanly. I'll bring in the coffee, sir, as usual."

Mrs. Pike did bring in the coffee, and asked if Chris was going out. As the village was noisy with

holiday-makers, and there was no excuse for him to go and see Alice, the young man said that he would stay at home and read. Mrs. Pike was very well satisfied, as she mentioned that she wanted to go to bed early, having a headache, and would feel more comfortable if she knew that her lodger was in *his* bed, though, of course, he had a latchkey, as every gentleman should. Chris impatiently cut short her babble and sent her away, but she began again when she brought in whisky and soda at a quarter to nine o'clock. Then Mrs. Pike notified that she was going straight to bed, and made good her notification by being between the sheets by nine. Being tired, she soon fell asleep in spite of her headache, and her last recollection was of the church clock sounding a quarter-past nine. After that she lost herself in slumber, and began to dream. The cheery little woman usually was too tired to dream, and, moreover, lacked imagination to dream. But on this occasion, although she was very tired indeed, she did dream. Afterwards she said that her dreaming so unexpectedly was a dispensation of Providence, as it led to her awakening.

Mrs. Pike dreamed that she was on a long high-road which seemed to lead to nowhere. Along this she trudged, and unexpectedly came face to face with a large house resembling the manor. At the door of this she knocked hard, feeling sure in her dream that something dreadful was taking place inside at which her presence was necessary. She knocked and knocked fruitlessly, and the knocks sounded like thunder. All at once she woke with a jerk, but the thunderous knocking still continued. It sounded as though some one was hammering at the front door, and Mrs. Pike jumped up to light the candle and see what was the matter. Wondering if her lodger had been awakened also by the untimely noise, the little woman

ran to the door, and stumbled against Chris in his pyjamas in the act of opening it. When it was open the light of the candle showed the terrified wrinkled face of Sarah Jundy.

"Master Chris, Master Chris," babbled Sarah, who was terror-struck, "Miss Agnes is dead. She has been murdered!"

CHAPTER XI

AFTERWARDS

WHEN dawn was breaking, a rumour spread through Wichley that the old lady of the Manor House had been murdered. Later the fact was confirmed by the knowledge, which passed from mouth to mouth, that Constable Green was up at the big house looking into matters, and had sent for his inspector. Little by little the dread circumstances became known to every one, and knots of people gathered in the streets and in the public-houses to discuss the untoward event. Quite a crowd gathered round the park gates, and some bold spirits even went up to the house itself. But Green sent them away, and placed two men to guard the grounds. Exciting as had been the doings of the previous day, with its noisy revelry, the terrible news was still more exciting, and all business was more or less suspended, so great was the sensation. In the shop of Mrs. Banks many were present to exchange opinions.

"In the midst of life we are in death," wailed Mrs. Banks, who was behind the counter, enjoying the dismal state of things enormously. "Who'd have believed as Mrs. Baltin would go in this unprepared manner?"

"Who killed her?" asked a curious neighbour.

"No one knows," replied Dolly, while her mother wiped away her tears. "She was found by Sarah Jundy at eleven o'clock strangled in the drawing-room."

"Lor', how awful!" The neighbour shuddered. "And the young squire?"

"Sarah came rushing to Mrs. Pike's immediately with the news, and Chris—oh, I mean Mr. Larcher went at once to the manor. On the way he and Sarah met Green, who went with them. They are all there now, and Inspector Hixon is coming to take charge of the case."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Banks with relish, "who'd have thought such a thing would happen in our little village?"

"'Tain't the only thing as has happened," put in a rough-looking youth who was lounging at the door. "Mr. Felk's house has been broken into, and things hev been stole."

"Lor'!" said the curious neighbour again. "Who told you?"

"Walters, as is Mr. Felk's man. He ses as he and his master never heard a cry or a sound in the night, but when they came downstairs in the morning the winder of the dining-room was open and goods was wanting."

"The casement of Mrs. Baltin's drawing-room was also open," said Dolly, who had her ears and eyes on the alert. "I shouldn't be surprised as him who did one thing did the other."

"I did hear as Mrs. Baltin's diamonds were stolen," said Mrs. Banks, "so it may be as robbery's the reason for these dreadful things happening."

"H'm!" said her daughter. "It might be as some one as had a grudge against Mrs. Baltin did the deed."

"Oh, there's plenty as has grudges against her," said another neighbour; "but Mr. Felk's a harmless gent as ain't got enemies. And you observed yourself, Miss Banks, as him as did one thing did the other."

"It's only an idea of mine," replied Dolly significantly. "Mr. Felk's burglary might be a red herring drawn across the trail of him as strangled the old lady."

"What do you mean?" asked half a dozen astonished voices.

"I don't mean anything; it isn't my business. Only there's people in this village as 'ud gladly have seen Mrs. Baltin in the grave."

"Jem Trap, for one," hinted the rough youth, who was an unsuccessful suitor of Dolly's, and bore the poacher no good-will. "He was fair raging t'other night in the Red Horse taproom 'cause the old gel whacked him."

"Jem Trap indeed!" cried Dolly indignantly. "Why, we all know as Jem's bark is worse nor his bite. You might as well accuse Mr. Larcher because his aunt was going to make a new will this very day."

There was a general start when this observation was made, and the idea seemed to impress the most careless. This was exactly the result which Miss Banks wished to bring about, although she had given the hint in the manner of an indignant and impossible comparison. Every one looked at every one else, and the faces of all bore startled expressions.

"The young squire *was* going to be cut off with a shilling," murmured the curious neighbour, "and like as not he'd do much to stop that there new will being made."

"He wouldn't commit murder," said Dolly sharply, for having sown the seed of suspicion she did not wish to be connected with the harvest. "I never meant to say such a thing. I only remarked as you might as well suspect Mr. Larcher as Jem Trap."

"There's Dr. Pess with his devils, you know," struck in another bold spirit. "He might have got one of them to strangle her."

"Rubbish!" cried Mrs. Banks, with more vigour than might have been expected from so weak a woman. "Devils as haven't hands and bodies can't hurt people."

They are what you might call air, while folks is flesh and blood. Besides, as we all know, Dr. Pess was going to get the money under this new will, and he ain't the man to queer his own pitch."

"Oh, the doctor ain't so fond of cash as all that," cried a former patient of the little man. "He's a good sort, and cured me of rheumatism wonderful."

"Who said as he's over-fond of money?" inquired Mrs. Banks. "Not me. But one needn't be a miser to refuse money when it's thrown at you, so to speak. And you'd all better clear out, as I ain't going to have these things said in my shop. First it's Jem Trap as you accuses, then it's Mr. Larcher, and now it's Dr. Pess. There ain't one of them guilty, I swear. Don't tell me! You'll have the police on you if you talk so."

"It's only to pass the time," blurted out the rough youth.

"Then talk of more pious things to pass the time. I'm sure the dreadful death of Mrs. Baltin's a warning to us all. Any day we might go," mourned Mrs. Banks, becoming lachrymose again, "being but frail flowers. To-day we are men and women; to-morrow we may be angels."

"I'll bet as Mrs. Baltin ain't no angel," sniggered a little man with a mean face and a timid manner.

"She was a oner, she was."

"It ain't for you to say who's angels and who ain't," cried Dolly, taking part in the conversation after some moments of quietness; "and if Mrs. Baltin wasn't good enough for above, she wasn't bad enough for below. So there, Billy Ward!"

"Where's she gone to, then, if she ain't one or the other?" inquired Billy Ward.

"Oh, don't bother me and mother. We've got enough to do without answering your silly questions.

Mrs. Baltin's dead, and soon she'll be buried, so that's all about it. Get out the lot of you ! ”

Dolly in her vigorous way came from behind the counter and drove the gossips out of the shop, only allowing those to remain who were anxious to buy goods. The people, scattered in one place, came together in another, and the Red Horse did as roaring a trade on this day as it had done on the previous day. There was plenty to talk about, many speculations and an immense quantity of suggestions. All this chatter made people thirsty ; and as they were enjoying every moment, they did no work, but gave themselves up to discussing the tragedy. Never before had such a one happened in the quiet village, so they made the most of it.

Up at the Manor House Chris, very greatly disturbed, was conversing with Inspector Hixon, who had just arrived. For many hours the young squire—and now he really was the young squire—had been at the Manor House looking into matters, together with Constable Green. Both of them were glad when the inspector arrived to take charge of the case, as it was hard to know what to do. The body of Mrs. Baltin had not been removed, but was still lying in the armchair in the drawing-room which she usually occupied when alive. Sarah Jundy, who had been weeping and wailing over the tragic death of her old mistress and friend, had been sent up to her own chamber, and the drawing-room had been locked up pending the arrival of the inspector. When he came he brought with him three policemen to place in charge of the house, and sent Green away for a rest, since he had been on duty all night. Hixon suggested that Chris also should take a rest before they conversed, as he looked fagged out. But Larcher refused, as he was less tired than he appeared to be, and, moreover, was very anxious to

hear what the inspector had to say with regard to the death. Chris was quite overcome by the tragic event; he had never expected to enter into his kingdom in this melodramatic fashion.

The two men entered the drawing-room, which was in exactly the same state as when Sarah Jundy had discovered the death of her mistress, and proceeded to look into things. They also took with them Dr. Pess, who had unexpectedly arrived, and who was terribly shocked to learn what had happened. On the previous night he had left Mrs. Baltin in good health, and now he found her a corpse. Although he was the medical attendant of the dead woman, he asked that another doctor might be called in to report about the matter, and to this Inspector Hixon agreed. Pess, therefore, went away to find another physician, looking very mournful and sad. Chris generously ascribed this emotion to the death of Mrs. Baltin, for whom Pess had had a sincere regard, and did not put it down, as a meaner spirit might have done, to the loss endured by the little man in connection with the property. For undoubtedly Pess had lost much by Mrs. Baltin's failure to make a new will, and, careless as he was of money, it was not impossible that he regretted the untoward turn events had taken. At the same time Chris remembered how Pess had intended to make a deed of gift of the property to him if the new will had been made, and, therefore, hoped that he did not feel the loss as much as might have been expected. Then, when the little man was out of the house, he turned his attention to the inspector.

Hixon was a tall, soldierly-looking man, with a dark face, dark hair, and dark eyes, abrupt in his manner and blunt in his speech. He examined the body lying in the chair, and afterwards searched the room. All the casements were closed save one—that very one through

which Mr. Dene had delivered his denunciation, although neither Hixon nor Chris knew this. The inspector pointed out this open casement to the young squire.

"The murderer might have come in and gone out there," he said quickly. "Was Mrs. Baltin in the habit of having the windows open?"

"On the contrary, she was of such a chilly nature that she usually had them closed," answered Chris, looking puzzled.

"The weather is very warm, remember."

"Oh, my poor aunt never could feel warm enough. Summer and winter she had the windows closed and a fire lighted. See!" And Chris pointed to the ashes in the grate.

Hixon nodded, and examined the casement. "It has not been forced," he remarked, "and, as it could not have been opened from the outside, Mrs. Baltin must have opened it herself, or some one must have done so by her order. Who discovered the body?"

"My aunt's maid, Sarah Jundy."

"I'll question her later. But look here, Mr. Larcher." Hixon crossed to where the body was huddled up in the chair. "Your aunt appears to have been a very dressy woman. Black velvet and good lace, which I know when I see it. But why does she wear no jewellery?"

Chris came hastily across the room. "She does," he said frankly; "she always wore her diamonds."

"Diamonds?" Hixon pricked up his ears. "Where are they?"

Larcher could see none. Necklace, brooch, rings, and bracelets were all conspicuous by their absence. "She has been robbed!" declared the young man, with a look of dismay.

"Are you sure that she wore her diamonds last night?"

"You can ask Sarah Jundy; she would know. But so far as I am aware my aunt wore her jewels—that is, some of them. She had thousands of pounds worth of gems in the safe."

"Where is the safe?"

"In her bedroom."

"Let us have a look at it. Seems to me that robbery is the motive for this crime. Tell some one to send the maid to me."

The message was sent, and by the time Hixon and the squire reached the bedroom of the deceased woman Sarah was in attendance. The poor little woman looked more like a death's-head than ever with her lean face all distorted with grief and her eyes red with constant weeping. At Hixon's request she pointed out the safe, and produced the key, which was in her charge, since Mrs. Baltin had always trusted her implicitly. The inspector threw aside the curtain which veiled the safe—the same being let into the wall near the bed—and put the key into the lock. It turned easily enough, and it would seem that the safe had not been tampered with.

"And, of course, it couldn't be," declared Sarah Jundy to Hixon, "as I was here up to eleven o'clock last night waiting for my mistress to come to bed. If any one had come into the room I should have heard, as I was wide awake, sewing."

"I'll question you about your doings later," said the inspector dryly. "In the meantime look and see if any jewels are missing."

Sarah took out tray after tray of gems and ornaments, several bags of gold, and two or three bundles of notes. Everything was in order, and nothing was missing, so Hixon turned away with a nod. "That's all right,"

he said, making for the door. "Now we can return to the drawing-room. You come also," he added, addressing the maid.

"It isn't robbery, then," said Chris, as they descended the stairs, "since the safe has not been broken into."

"It is robbery, since the diamonds your aunt wore have been stolen," retorted the officer.

"One swallow does not make a summer, inspector."

"One swallow is pretty good evidence that summer is hanging about, Mr. Larcher, anyhow," said Hixon, and took out his note-book. "Now then, Sarah Jundy, you answer my questions, and be careful. Anything you say will be used in evidence against you."

"Well, I'm sure!" said the maid, bridling. "As if I had anything to do with the poor dear's death! She had her tantrums, it's true, as we all hev; but I'd hev defended her to the last. I'll tell the truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God; and heaven knows as Him as is above is needed to help now."

"When did you see your mistress last alive?" questioned the inspector.

"At nine o'clock last night in this very room, sir, when she asked me to show Dr. Pess out."

"Oh, Dr. Pess was here?"

"Yes. He came arter dinner at seven, and left at nine o'clock. He came most nights to see Miss Agnes, and went away at odd times."

"Why didn't the butler or the footman show him out?"

"'Cause I came into this room to ask if Miss Agnes would take her biscuit and port, which she usually did at nine. She told me to show Dr. Pess out, and to bring in the tray."

"She was quite friendly with the doctor, I take it?"

"Quite. They was as thick as thieves always. He said as he'd come next day as usual, and then went out."

"What did you do then?"

"I brought in the tray with the wine and biscuits, and asked Miss Agnes if she was coming to bed. She said as she'd letters to write, and would ring when she wanted me. I went up to her room and took on with my sewing, waiting as patient as an owl. It was eleven, or close on eleven, when I wondered why she didn't come upstairs. I went down to see, and found her as she is now." And Sarah Jundy shuddered as she looked at the limp figure in the chair.

"Was the casement over there open?"

"I don't know, sir. I was much too flustered to notice anything. What I did do was to holler loud and wake the servants. Then I left them to look arter the remains, and ran for dear life to get Master Chris."

"Sarah knocked me and my landlady up shortly after eleven o'clock last night, inspector. I came back with her at once, and we took Green, the constable, with us. We met him while on our way here," ended Chris quickly.

"You are Mrs. Baltin's nephew and heir?" asked the inspector, looking puzzled.

"Yes. What of that?"

"I was wondering why you didn't live in the house."

"I did live in the house until lately. But my aunt was vexed with me owing to my desire to marry a certain lady, and insisted that I should take rooms elsewhere."

"Oh!" Hixon looked suspicious. "You had quarrelled?"

"The quarrel was on her part and not on mine," said Larcher with emotion. "I did all I could to prevent trouble. But my aunt was an obstinate

woman, and resented any one having his or her own way."

"Miss Agnes was always a mule," murmured Sarah; "every one knew that."

"You were well acquainted with her apparently," said the inspector.

"Lord bless you, sir, we was gels together in Somerset. I've been her maid these thirty and more years."

"Was she the kind of woman to make enemies?"

"She hadn't a single friend except myself and Master Chris here. We put up with her tantrums, knowing her bark was wuss nor her bite. But she *could* bite," said Sarah Jundy with emphasis, "none harder."

Hixon stared at the body. "It might be revenge," he said half to himself, "but the absence of the jewels points to robbery. Were they valuable?"

Sarah nodded. "She always wore about one thousand pounds worth, being a lady given to wearing the best of everything."

Hixon nodded in his turn, as if satisfied. "Did you hear any noise—any cry—anything at all?"

"Not a sound. This 'ouse is tombs for quietness. I dessay, sir, as they was a noisy lot in the village, as it was Bank Holiday yesterday, but nothing came as far as here in the way of shouts, or cries, or larky hollering."

The examination had got thus far when Pess entered with another medical man, whom he introduced as Dr. Swift, and also mentioned that Constable Green was in the hall anxious to speak to his superior officer. Hixon asked Swift to examine the body and determine the time of death, then went out to see the constable. Evidently something important had occurred to make Green rise from his bed and return to the Manor House.

"There has been a burglary, sir," said Green, saluting. "I was taking my rest, as you allowed me

to, sir, when Mr. Felk's manservant, Walters, came to tell my wife as his master's house had been broken into and robbed. My wife woke me, and I took down what Walters had to say."

Hixon nodded, and glanced over the hastily-written report. "The safe in Mr. Felk's study was broken open, and two hundred pounds in gold was stolen," he read, "also some silver cups from the dining-room sideboard."

"Yes, sir," said Green. "Walters told me that the glass of the drawing-room window had been cut with a diamond, and then the snick was turned back. Neither he nor his master heard any noise, and only found out the loss this morning early."

"A murder at one house and a robbery at another!" said Hixon, after a pause. "Where does Mr. Felk live?"

"At the other end of the village, sir. And beg pardon, sir, but yesterday was Bank Holiday, sir, and there was a rough crowd come here. I shouldn't wonder if some of them London thieves came also. The robbery at Mr. Felk's was wonderfully smartly managed."

Hixon nodded again. "Mrs. Baltin's diamonds have been stolen from her body," he remarked, putting the report into his pocket. "I'll see Mr. Felk and his man later. Meanwhile, Green, go back and take your rest. I have plenty of men here to do my bidding."

Green saluted and went away, while Hixon returned to the drawing-room, to find that Swift had completed his examination. It was the opinion of the doctor that Mrs. Baltin had been strangled somewhere about ten o'clock—he could not tell exactly to a minute. "And she died very easily," said Swift, "as she was old and feeble. Considerable strength must have

been used, Mr. Inspector, as you can see the black marks on the throat."

"Would she have time to utter a cry?"

"I don't think so. The man who strangled her would have choked any cry the moment he got his fingers round her throat. Death must have ensued at once."

"There was a struggle, however," said Chris, pointing to a small writing-table near the armchair which was overturned. "See, the pens and ink and papers are scattered all over the carpet. The man must have come behind her and upset this table, then forced my unfortunate aunt back into the armchair."

Hixon mused for a few minutes, and the others kept silent while he did so. He walked towards the casement, which was still open, and examined the sill. There were no marks on it, and on looking out he could see no marks on the grass below. The weather was dry, and had been dry for a long time, so it was not likely that any marks would be left by the criminal either coming or going.

"I can't quite understand it," said the inspector at last. "Was Mrs. Baltin deaf in any way?"

"No," struck in Sarah Jundy promptly; "she was as sharp as a cat for hearing."

"Then she must have raised her eyes on hearing the noise of the murderer getting in at this window. Did the writing-table face the window?"

Sarah answered again. "Yes, it did, sir. Miss Agnes asked me to get the table and the writing things when I came in with her biscuits and wine at nine or thereabouts. I put the table—you see it's a light one, sir—just a little way from the armchair, and when seated she would have her back to the fire to get warm, which she set great store by."

Hixon nodded. "She certainly would face the window in that case," he remarked. "It was strange that she did not cry out if she saw a man enter."

"My aunt was as bold as a lion," said Chris quickly, "and never called for help unless she thought it necessary. What do you mean exactly, inspector?"

"I was wondering if she knew the intruder," said Hixon significantly. "If she did, of course she would not cry out, but would allow him to enter."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Pess. "Mrs. Baltin would think it strange that any one, whether she knew him or not, should enter by the window."

"True enough. What time did you leave her, doctor?"

"Somewhere about nine o'clock. Sarah here showed me out by the front door."

"And you went home?"

"Yes, I went home." Pess was surprised by the question. "There was no reason why I should stay."

"No, no! Of course not," observed the inspector hurriedly. "Only I fancied you might have anticipated trouble with all these Bank Holiday people in the village. There was bound to be some rogues amongst them."

"I never anticipated any trouble, inspector. Mrs. Baltin has lived here for more than forty years, and, through the same number, double and treble of Bank Holidays. Yet nothing ever occurred."

"Was she quite confident that all was well, Dr. Pess?"

"Quite. At least, we never spoke of anything being wrong. Such a thing as her being in danger never entered her mind. Who murdered her, or why she should have been murdered, I cannot tell."

"Nor can any one else," observed Chris, with a sigh.

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Larcher," said Hixon sharply. "Mr. Felk's house has been robbed. The burglar who did one job did the other. That's my opinion."

"Mine, too," said Sarah Jundy emphatically. "It all comes of Bank Holidays."

CHAPTER XII

SUSPICIONS

THE search for the assassin of Mrs. Baltin was like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay. Owing to the holiday the population of Wichley had been doubled for the time being, and it was wholly impossible to pick out the culprit from such a multitude. Many strangers of rough and shady character had been in the vicinity; but there was no evidence to show that any of these had committed the burglary or the murder. Besides Green, who was the resident constable, several policemen from the surrounding suburbs had been told off to keep order in the village while the unusual influx of visitors lasted. None of these officials had seen anything suspicious, nor were able to suggest that this person or that was guilty. Hixon did his best to learn if any criminal known to the authorities had paid a visit to the place. But his inquiries resulted in total failure, and when the inquest was held the inspector had little or no evidence to lay before the coroner and jury. According to Hixon's belief, the robbery and the murder were the work of one and the same individual. But who that individual was no one could say.

The vicar was quite overcome by the news of his enemy's tragic death, although, in his narrow way, he looked upon it as a judgment on her for tampering with unholy matters. He maintained persistently that if she had taken his advice, and had given up sinful communication with the dead, she would still have been alive. He agreed with the inspector that Mrs. Baltin had been done to death by some thievish

stranger from London, and on attending the inquest he found that the jury held the same view. In the face of the evidence laid before them, they could only bring in an open verdict, which was accordingly done. People were rather disappointed at such a common-place ending to the matter, as they expected all kinds of revelations. This expectation was based upon the rumours which ran through the village like wildfire regarding Larcher and Jem Trap, as it was freely hinted that one or the other knew something about the truth. Hixon may or may not have heard this loose talk ; but if he did, he took no notice of it. To him the truth was apparent. That same burglar who had entered Felk's house had entered the house of Mrs. Baltin also, and, on finding the old lady in the drawing-room, had strangled her for the sake of the jewels she wore. The inspector notified the Scotland Yard authorities, and a watch was kept on all the pawnshops in London ; also on all such receivers of stolen goods as were known. Only by tracing Felk's possessions was the assassin of Mrs. Baltin likely to be traced. So far as her diamonds were concerned, they were probably unset and sold singly. So far the inspector could go, but no farther, as he did not see in which direction he could move.

The sole new piece of evidence which was given at the inquest came from Dr. Pess, who acknowledged that he had opened the casement at Mrs. Baltin's request. They were, he admitted, holding a séance, and when it was over the old lady complained of being faint. As the room was hot because of the sultry weather and the fire, Pess had opened the window. Immediately afterwards he had left the house, and so far as he knew the casement had not been shut. This information convinced every one that the unknown burglar who had robbed Felk's house was the

guilty person. Doubtless he had been lurking in the park, and on seeing the casement open had climbed in to commit the crime. And on the face of it this appeared to be a reasonable solution of the mystery. It was accepted by many people, but some still persisted in ascribing the deed to Jem Trap, who had been heard to threaten Mrs. Baltin, or to Larcher, who had so much to gain by her death before she could execute her new will. Nevertheless no one was bold enough to actually accuse either man, and it would seem that the common-sense verdict of the jury was generally accepted. At all events, Hixon, always on the alert for information, took no notice of the rumours.

In due time Mrs. Baltin's body was laid in the family vault under the shadow of the square tower. A large concourse of people gathered at the funeral, more out of curiosity than sympathy, for the old lady had been by no means popular, and not even her tragic death could make them regret her. The ceremony of interment was performed in grim silence on the part of the onlookers, and then they returned home to congratulate themselves that they had got rid of a tyrant. Christopher Larcher was now the new squire, as the old will still held good, and Mr. Armour, the family lawyer, solemnly informed him of his succession to the vacant throne of Brentford. The inhabitants of Wichley were delighted, as they knew that Chris would deal with them more leniently than his aunt had done. With the burial of Mrs. Baltin it would seem that all the troubles of the past were buried, and that henceforth all could look forward to a time of peace. But one person was determined that these expectations should be disappointed, and that person was Miss Dolly Banks.

On the day after the funeral Mr. Dene received a

visit from Miss Hesmond, which rather surprised him, as they had little to do with one another. The old maid considered the vicar to be narrow and illogical, while he condemned her as a heretic holding most unorthodox opinions. The fact was that Mr. Dene was conscious that Miss Hesmond knew more about religion than he did, although he would never have acknowledged it; and this being the case, his Levitical pride made him dislike her. He received her very stiffly in his study, placed a chair for her, and then took his own seat to await an explanation. Miss Hesmond, who was perfectly cool and mistress of herself, lost no time in coming to the point.

"What are you going to do about Alice and Chris?" she asked abruptly.

"Really, Miss Hesmond, I have not had time to consider," said the vicar, drawing himself up indignantly, "and in any case I do not see what business it is of yours."

"Oh, yes, it is, Mr. Dene. I am Chris's fairy-godmother, and I wish to see him a happy man. He will not be completely happy until he marries Alice."

"I wish my daughter to marry Mr. Felk," said Dene doggedly.

"Why?"

"Am I bound to give a reason to you, Miss Hesmond?"

"Yes" she replied grimly—that is, as grimly as her naturally sunny nature would allow. "There is Alice's happiness to be considered, and to that you have given very little thought."

"How do you know?"

"I keep my eyes and ears open. A parent, Mr. Dene, has great power over his or her children, but he or she must not abuse that power. Alice has no mother, and you think that you can arrange her

future as you like. That is not right. To her you must grant the same freedom as you claim yourself, as she is of age, and is a human being as well as your daughter. Marriage means everything to a woman ; therefore you must allow Alice to choose for herself."

" Oh, must I ? " said Dene, his obstinacy aroused immediately. " And at your bidding Miss Hesmond ? If you will pardon my saying so in my own house, I do not recognize your right to say what you have said. You take too much upon yourself."

Miss Hesmond grasped her little silk bag with a fervent desire to throw it at the vicar's head, but restrained herself, as she silently admitted that her interference did seem rather uncalled for. " I apologize if I exceed my rights, Mr. Dene," she observed quietly, " but Chris is very dear to me, as I have never had a child of my own. I know that his whole life is bound up in Alice ; and if you force her to marry some one else, Chris may, in despair, return to his old foolish ways."

" I did not know that he had given them up."

" Yes, you do know that. Chris never was so bad as people made him out to be, Mr. Dene. All his alleged profligacy only arose from high spirits. He has never wronged any woman ; he has never been a drunkard or a gambler in the strict sense of the words. Like most young men, he has flirted, and has given wine-parties, and has betted a trifle ; but certainly not to the extent with which he is credited. His vices, if you can call them so, were merely the outcome of youth and an idle life. As you know, he has done what I suggested, and has worked hard to become a veterinary surgeon."

" Not quite the profession I desire for my daughter's husband," said the vicar dryly and acidly.

"I think a veterinary surgeon occupies quite as good a position as a stockbroker," answered the old maid equally dryly. "In fact, to my mind, Chris's profession is the nobler one. It should rank with that of an ordinary doctor."

"How do you make that out, Miss Hesmond?"

"Well, doctors attend to human beings and veterinary surgeons to animals, so there is little to choose between them. In fact, a veterinary surgeon has the harder task, as human beings can say what is the matter with them, whereas animals cannot. And," continued Miss Hesmond, warming to her theme, "the examination is quite as difficult. Chris has had years of hard work to qualify himself to look after animals. He has studied chemistry, physics, botany, anatomy, pathology, physiology——"

"Stop! stop!" Mr. Dene threw up a protesting hand. "You appear to be quite learned, Miss Hesmond, in using these long words. Doubtless Mr. Larcher is clever, and has studied hard. Still, the fact remains that his profession is not one which I should like for the husband of my daughter."

"Well, then, let us leave the profession out of the question," said Miss Hesmond promptly. "Now that Chris has come into his kingdom there will no longer be any necessity for him to be a veterinary surgeon. He will have quite enough to do in looking after the estate, which, as you know, comprises the village. Alice will be the lady of the manor, so you can't wish for a better position for her than that."

"The position is good enough," said Mr. Dene, who was impressed by these arguments, although he still continued to be obstinate. "But Mr. Felk——"

"Well," asked Miss Hesmond sharply, "and what about Mr. Felk? Who is he? Where does he come from? What do you know of his character?"

"I have known Mr. Felk's father, who is now dead, for years. We were at college together, Miss Hesmond."

"Knowing the father does not mean knowing the son, and it is the son you wish to marry Alice to."

"Felk is all right," said Dene uneasily.

"How do you know? So far as I am aware, you only renewed your acquaintance with him in London some short time ago. Attracted by your description of the village, he came down here and took a house. But he is usually away, and no one knows anything about him. He has no friends here."

"Felk is all right," persisted the vicar angrily. "I met him at the house of a mutual friend, who knew his father also. There is nothing wrong with the young man."

"And you want your daughter to marry a man of whom you can say nothing but that?" said Miss Hesmond, in disdain. "What a fond parent you are! Many men are scamps and villains, yet because they have money and position people only can say there is nothing wrong with them. But can Mr. Felk make Alice happy? Is he a good man?"

"As good as most. But really," cried Mr. Dene, rising, "I cannot answer all these unnecessary questions. Come into the drawing-room. Mr. Felk is there with my daughter. You can ask him what you please."

Miss Hesmond stood up promptly and accepted. "Show me the way," she said.

"Oh!" The vicar was somewhat taken aback. He had said what he did say in order to put an end to the interview, and had not expected her acceptance of his proposition. "I don't think it will be quite the thing for you to pry into Mr. Felk's private affairs."

"Then why did you suggest it?" said Miss Hesmond coolly. "But now that you have suggested it I

intend to do what you say. I have not yet met Mr. Felk, although I have seen him at a distance. Come along, Mr. Dene, let us go into the drawing-room and face the enemy."

"Mr. Felk is not my enemy, and he is devoted to Alice. I don't care to ask him such pointed questions as you wish to put. Therefore I shall remain here."

"Well"—Miss Hesmond tossed her head and moved towards the door—"you are not so strong and bold as I took you to be."

"I can be strong and bold when necessary," said Dene angrily.

"It is necessary now. It never was more necessary, seeing that the happiness of your daughter is at stake. Do be reasonable, Mr. Dene. Send Mr. Felk away, and allow Alice to marry Chris."

The vicar, annoyed by her persistence, was on the point of giving way according to custom, when a bright idea occurred to him. "I shall allow Alice to marry Mr. Larcher when he clears his character of these aspersions."

"What aspersions?" asked Miss Hesmond, turning at the door.

"Well, people hint that he knows more of this murder than he cares to say."

"Mr. Dene, I am surprised at you! How dare you say such a thing? It would be bad enough for a layman to make such a remark, but it is ten times worse in a clergyman."

"I am not to be taught my duty by you, Miss Hesmond."

"Indeed, I think it was time you were taught," she retorted. "Who are you to judge any one? 'Judge not that ye be not judged.' That's what the Master you profess to follow said, and you are disobeying Him."

"Oh, go away ! go away !" groaned the vicar, overwhelmed by this torrent of words.

"I am going away—into the drawing-room to see Mr. Felk and protect Alice from him. So there !"

"I forbid you to do so," cried Dene, starting to his feet.

"What do I care for that ? I daresay I am overstepping the bounds of courtesy, as I always believe in minding my own business and in letting other people conduct theirs as they choose. But in this case the happiness of two people dear to me is at stake, and I intend to fight for them. You should fight, but you shirk the combat. As to Chris having anything to do with the death of his aunt, you had better take care what you say, Mr. Dene."

"I don't say that he knows anything about the death," protested Dene ; "I only repeat what rumours are prevalent."

"Then you shouldn't. I'll look into these rumours myself. The idea ! Chris, who is a dear, good boy, and was vilely treated by that old woman, is not the person to hurt her."

"Speak good of the dead."

"Then you speak good of the living. However, it is no use your talking or my talking. Alice shall marry the man she loves if she has to run away and do so. I intend to stand her friend, Mr. Dene, even if her father won't."

The vicar fairly gasped. "I was never spoken to so before in my life."

"Then it's time you were. I'm rude, and I'm bold, and I'm meddlesome ; I am anything you like, Mr. Dene. All the same, I'm going to risk the loss of my character in all those ways in order to save Alice from an unhappy marriage."

Miss Hesmond, who was wrought up to white heat, bounced out of the room, while Dene sank back into his chair wondering how he could get rid of her. All his lordly airs had produced no effect, and she had met his obstinacy with a stubbornness equal to his own. And, as had been stated, the vicar really was a weak man, although he spoke loudly and bullied those who were weaker than he was. Miss Hesmond was by no means weak, and, moreover, was reckless what she did or said so long as she knew herself to be in the right. It was impossible to deal with her, especially as her orthodox feminine weakness made her strong. A man can deal with another man, because he can knock him down when all else fails ; but as a woman cannot be knocked down, unless a man sinks to the level of a brute, the contest between the sexes is unequal. The woman always wins, and in this case she had won hands down. Miss Hesmond had the field of victory to herself, and Dene was completely defeated in spite of his assumption of strength. All he ~~wished~~ wished now was to get her out of the house.

But Miss Hesmond had no intention of leaving the house, and nothing less than brute force would remove her. She marched into the drawing-room without the ceremony of knocking, and came upon the couple un-awares. One of the two, at all events, was relieved by her sudden entrance, and that was Alice. For the last hour Felk had been pressing her to marry him, and she had refused him again and again for quite sixty minutes. Now she looked irritated and nervous, while Felk, bland and smiling, was persistently persecuting her into acquiescence. Miss Hesmond had arrived in the nick of time.

" I'm sorry to interrupt," said the old maid grimly, as she surveyed the tokens of a hard-fought battle, " but I want you, Alice, to come and have tea with

me this afternoon. Mr. Larcher is coming." This last was for the benefit of Felk.

"I think Mr. Larcher had better stay at home until he clears his character."

Miss Hesmond turned to Felk, who had thus spoken, and looked at him steadily for a few minutes. She thought that he was an effeminate dandy at the first glance, but at the second she changed her mind. There was strength looking out of those pale blue eyes, and the strength was evil in its tendency. Also, being very sensitive to impressions, the old woman felt that the man was wicked and unscrupulous—felt, moreover, that he was strong enough, in spite of his mincing looks, to carry out any purpose he set his mind upon. More than ever she was determined in her own mind that Alice should not marry him. With her usual promptitude she opened the campaign. "I don't think we have met," she said in a polite but watchful manner.

"Miss Hesmond—Mr. Felk; Mr. Felk—Miss Hesmond," said Alice hurriedly, and glad that such a tried friend was beside her.

"How are you, Mr. Felk?" Miss Hesmond did not offer her hand. "You will find me rather a queer person. And one of my odd ways is that I don't like to hear any one spoken of badly behind his or her back."

"I am only saying what every one says," blurted out Felk coolly.

"I see. You listen to the scandal of the village. Apparently you have an object in doing so. Yet I believe you have only been in Wichley a few months."

"Only a few months," retorted Felk, as calm in his demeanour as she was; "and with your leave, Miss Dene, I shall take my departure."

"Take these with you also," said Alice, approaching

a table, and she turned towards Felk holding out a photograph and a necklace of rubies. "I don't want them, as I really cannot marry you."

"I shall take the necklace," said Felk, accepting the same, "but I beg of you to retain the photograph in the hope that the original will in time make an impression on your heart."

"Who is the original?" asked Miss Hesmond abruptly.

"I am the original," said Felk politely, as he slipped the necklace into his pocket. "I wish to marry Miss Dene."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Felk. Miss Dene is engaged to marry Mr. Larcher."

"Not with her father's consent," snapped the little man.

"Oh, I think that will now be obtained without much difficulty," said the old maid coolly. "You see, Mr. Felk, the vicar objected to the match because Mrs. Baltin dabbled in spiritualism. Now that she is dead and Mr. Larcher has the property there is no reason why Mr. Dene should withhold his consent."

"Oh, Miss Hesmond," gasped Alice, sitting down suddenly, "do you think that my father will——"

"I don't," interrupted Felk sharply. "Pardon my interrupting, Miss Dene, but your father knows about these rumours in the village."

"You told him about them, I suppose?" suggested Miss Hesmond tartly.

"Well, I did. You see, I know that Mr. Larcher is my rival, and it occurred to me that it was just as well to bias the vicar in my favour."

"Ha! All's fair in love and war, you mean?"

"Exactly." And Mr. Felk made a polite little bow, apparently the weak courtesy of a society trifler. But the look in his eyes showed Miss Hesmond that he

was bent upon getting his own way by fair means or foul, just as he said.

"Hum!" observed the old maid thoughtfully, for she by no means underrated the strength of her antagonist. "It's a pity that we should meet only to fight, Mr. Felk. But I may as well tell you that Mr. Larcher is a particular pet of mine, and I want him to marry Miss Dene."

"Then I fear we must fight," said Felk, with another polite little bow and another look more venomous than the last, "for I wish to marry Miss Dene myself. Can you blame me?"

"I don't wish to marry you, Mr. Felk," cried Alice, exasperated. "I have been saying so for the last hour."

"Oh, you will change your mind."

"Never! never! never!" And Alice stamped.

"I don't see what you have against me," said Felk, with a wounded air. "I am rich, I am not bad-looking, I am very amiable, and I have an excellent position."

"Ha!" said Miss Hesmond again. "And who can vouch for all these things?"

"I vouch for myself."

"Naturally you would. But the vicar——"

"The vicar knew my father, and we met at the house of a friend of my father's, Miss Hesmond," said the little man quickly. "Mr. Dene knows all about my father."

"Does he know all about you?"

"There is nothing to be known," said Felk coldly. "If necessary I can give credentials to the vicar. I do not think it is necessary to give them to you."

"No?" inquired Miss Hesmond ironically.

"Well," said Felk, with a shrug, "I understand that you are not a relative of Miss Dene, or even a close friend of the vicar's."

"She is *my* dearest friend," said Alice, linking her arm in that of the old maid, "and she always gives me sensible advice."

"Such as advising you not to marry me, Miss Dene?"

"That, certainly. Alice is to marry Mr. Larcher."

"He must clear his character first!"

"That, assuredly," said a voice in the doorway, and the trio turned to behold the vicar. "I really think, Miss Hesmond, that you had better go."

"I see that you side with Mr. Felk in condemning Chris," said the old woman in a calm tone, "although why you should prefer your daughter to marry him rather than Chris, who is now rich and has a position, I cannot say."

"There is no need for you to say," rejoined the vicar hotly. "I don't like to be rude in my own house, but really your unauthorized interference——"

"It is not unauthorized," interrupted Alice, still clinging to Miss Hesmond's arm. "I authorize her to help me. I won't marry you, Mr. Felk, and nothing you or my father can say will make me marry you. I remain true to Chris, for I love him with all my heart and soul."

"You don't know what you are saying, Alice," said her father soothingly.

"I fear *you* don't," remarked Miss Hesmond coolly. "By the way, Mr. Felk, do you know anything about hypnotism?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"I mean several things, which I think you are quite clever enough to guess."

Felk glanced at the narrow, obstinate face of the vicar and then at the shrewd looks of the speaker. "Perhaps I am," he said, laughing significantly.

"What do both of you mean?" asked Dene, astonished and bewildered.

"We mean to declare war on one another," said Miss Hesmond, smiling.

Felk did not smile, but, on the contrary, for the first time looked a trifle alarmed. "I really do not see what business all this is of yours," he protested.

"No?" said Miss Hesmond sweetly, as she walked towards the door with Alice on her arm. "I think you will find that it *is* my business. I have to protect Mr. Larcher from your hate and Alice here from your love. Oh, it is very much my business, indeed! Good-day."

Leaving the two men rather puzzled, the little old lady walked to the front door with Alice. "Be of good cheer, my dear," she said, kissing her. "I have this to help me," and she showed the photograph of Mr. Felk, which she had stealthily taken.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MISCHIEF-MAKER

MRS. BALTIN was dead and buried, and Chris reigned in her stead. It was now a month since the new régime had been inaugurated, and the young squire found his hands full of dry-as-dust business. He inspected every house and every field on the estate, and had frequent interviews with Mr. Armour, the lawyer, regarding this thing and that. Many oppressive rules which his aunt had made Chris did away with altogether in some instances, and relaxed them in others. The villagers found their lot much easier, and congratulated themselves on the change. Larcher was always more or less popular in spite of his rumoured wild ways, and now, seeing that he proved to be so lenient a landlord, his popularity became very great indeed. All gossip concerning his presumed knowledge as to how Mrs. Baltin came by her death died away in murmurs of applause. All such chatter would have ceased entirely but for Dolly Banks.

That young lady was more than ever "a woman scorned," and had by no means forgiven Chris for his careless kisses and trifling attentions. She had never loved him in the true sense of the word, but had intended to marry him in order to become what she called a lady. And Dolly's idea of being a lady was to idle all day, spend all the money she could, dress in the finest of clothes, and snub those people in the rank of life from which she had risen. But the plain-speaking of Larcher and his love for Alice had caused all these dreams to vanish into nothing. Dolly could not even declare that Chris had compromised her, as Miss

Hesmond's unexpected presence at the interview in the porch had ruined that skilful little scheme. Miss Banks was utterly vanquished, and saw nothing better before her but marriage with Jem Trap. Naturally she was furious, and wished with all her heart to make Chris suffer and to pay him out for his behaviour. In the hope of attracting the attention of the police, she had set afloat the rumours connecting him with the death of his aunt. But now that such gossip was swamped in a chorus of praise Dolly was determined to gain her wicked ends in some more direct fashion. In a crude way she was a clever schemer; therefore she set her wits to work to prevent the marriage of the young squire with Alice, and to get him arrested if she possibly could. It was not an easy task, but Miss Banks did not mind hard work so long as she could tumble Chris down from his pedestal.

In order to learn exactly how things stood with the young couple, Dolly paid frequent visits to the vicarage and made close friends with the servants. From these she gathered that Felk was in love with Alice, and that his suit was favoured by Mr. Dene, although it was rejected by the girl herself. Also Dolly met Felk's valet, Walters, who told her that his master was bent upon making the vicar's daughter his wife, and hoped to do so by perseverance, since Mr. Dene would not hear of Chris as a son-in-law until he proved that he had nothing to do with the crime. Dolly rejoiced when she heard this, as she saw that her mischief-making had resulted in something tangible. Had she dared she would have seen Mr. Dene himself, and would have declared her belief that Larcher was truly guilty. But the vicar was a very unapproachable person, and, not guessing his real weakness of character, the villagers, Dolly included, believed him to be as great a tyrant as Mrs. Baltin had been. Therefore Miss Banks

refrained from taking so bold a step, and cast round to find another path. The name of Dr. Pess entered her mind.

It was well known that Pess would have had the estate and the money had Mrs. Baltin lived to make her new will, but it was not known that he did not desire the inheritance. That any man would refuse such a splendid property never entered Dolly's sordid little mind, and, naturally, she was sure that Dr. Pess felt his loss very keenly. Naturally also she believed that he hated Chris for getting what he had lost, and, therefore, would be a good person to ruin the young squire. Dolly made up her mind to see the doctor and tell him what she knew in the hope that he would communicate with the police. For a time she hesitated to commit herself to this bold line of action, but did so after an interview with Sarah Jundy. The triumphant air and conversation of the old maid made Dolly furious.

Sarah was, indeed, a happy woman, notwithstanding the death of her lifelong friend and mistress. She regretted the way in which Mrs. Baltin had met with her end, but privately confessed to a feeling of relief, as the old tyrant had been growing more and more trying every day. Of course, Sarah had not been dismissed even though warning had been given her in Miss Hesmond's presence, and, indeed, there was no time, as Mrs. Baltin had died long before the month was up. But Sarah knew and her mistress knew that it was only stage-thunder, and that while both lived both would be together. But now that the bond between them was broken by death Sarah breathed more freely, as she had long since grown tired of constant notice of dismissal being given whenever Mrs. Baltin happened to feel bad-tempered, and that was very often. Now Sarah acted as the housekeeper of her darling boy, and was to retain that post when

he married. Chris was fond of her, and so was Alice, so Sarah Jundy hoped to pass the rest of her days in peace and quietness. This was very desirable, as her life with Mrs. Baltin had always been more or less stormy. It was no wonder that the pleased old woman boasted triumphantly when she came to make some purchases at the grocer's.

"And if you ain't looking the picture of happiness, Mrs. Banks," said Sarah in an affable tone, "while roses ain't in it for bloom with you, Dolly. I'm feeling young myself, as if hundreds of years had tumbled off my shoulders."

"Why should you feel young, seeing that Mrs. Baltin is dead?" asked Dolly in a rather tart way.

"Mrs. Baltin was ripe fruit," said Sarah sturdily, "and if she did fall before her time, that same time, Dolly, my dear, wasn't in any case far distant. She's dead and buried, so why should I break my heart, seeing as breakings won't bring her to life again, poor dear?"

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Banks with relish, "we may go to her, but she will not return to us."

"I don't wish to go to her, Mrs. Banks, ma'am. I'm happy enough as I am. Master Chris is that kind as you'd think he was my own child, gentry though he be. And I'm that thankful as he got his own as never was. Now he's going to marry Miss Alice, and be as happy as a fairy-tale."

"I thought Miss Alice was to marry Mr. Felk," said Dolly, flushing redly.

"What, him?" screamed Sarah indignantly. "What rubbish! As if that thread-paper wisp of a man could compare with Master Chris! You don't know what you're talking about, Dolly Banks."

"Well, Walters, as is Mr. Felk's man, told me his master was set on the marriage."

"He can be as set as he likes—that Mr. Felk, I mean," cried the angry Sarah, "but that don't make things right for him. Miss Alice and Master Chris love one another like the Babes in the Wood, and marry they will."

"Ah! marriage is a lottery," said Mrs. Banks dismally, shaking her head. "You may get the bad fish out of the bag, and you may get the one eel."

"Miss Alice ain't neither a fish nor an eel, Mrs. Banks, ma'am. I beg of you not to call the future mistress of the Manor House by such sinful names."

"Mr. Dene won't agree to his daughter being the future mistress," sneered Dolly, inwardly boiling with rage. "Walters says as he refuses to allow Miss Alice to marry Chris—I mean Mr. Larcher——"

"I should think you did mean Mr. Larcher, Dolly," interpolated Sarah sharply.

"Well, anyhow, Mr. Dene refuses until Mr. Larcher has cleared his character."

"Oh indeed!" Sarah straightened herself with contempt. "And what's Mr. Dene or you or any one got to say about my deary boy's character?"

Dolly hesitated, as she knew that Sarah was fiery and impetuous. "I suppose he's heard people say as Mr. Larcher has something to do with the death of——"

"Never finish the lie you are telling," interrupted Sarah Jundy, with a gasp; "never say another word. Master Chris is an angel; he wouldn't hurt a fly. And to say such a wicked thing, Dolly Banks! Ain't you afeared of being struck dead like Ananias and Sapphira in the Bible? Miss Agnes was murdered by one of them thieves from London who came here on Bank Holiday, as is well known to the police. How dare you be wiser nor the judge and jury?"

"I'm not saying a word," said Dolly sulkily; "it's only what folk say."

"Then let 'em say it elsewhere than in Wichley," said Mrs. Jundy sharply, "or Master Chris will send them packing. It's all your spite, Dolly Banks, as no one is saying a word against my deary boy. Oh, I know all your goings-on, miss, and how you hoped as Master Chris would make you what you never will be, and that's a lady. Such impudence to think as gentry would look at the likes of you! Stick to Jem Trap and to your own humble rank in life."

"You get out of our shop!" cried Dolly, white with rage. •

"Dorothy! Dorothy!" remonstrated Mrs. Banks, alarmed by this tempest, and afraid lest she should lose her lease. "Don't go on so. It's only her play, Mrs. Jundy; she don't mean it."

"Play you call it to speak against Master Chris?" retorted Sarah, with a snort. "Well, I'm sure! You'd better look at home, Dolly Banks, if it's true what folks are saying about your going to become Mrs. Trap and have old Mother Corn for a grandmother. Jem said as he'd do for Mrs. Baltin when she laid her stick over his shoulders. He's much more like to have murdered Miss Agnes nor Master Chris. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!" ended Sarah, snapping her fingers in a triumphant manner.

"You'd better take care, or I'll have the law of you," threatened the girl.

"Oh, will you? Well, then, law or no law I'll say what I please, you minx! And it's the law in heaps as you'll hev if you say as Master Chris ain't as innocent as the driving snow. I shake the dust from my feet," said Mrs. Jundy, suiting the action to the word, "and I leave this shop never to buy as much as a penny stamp in it again."

"Mrs. Jundy! Mrs. Jundy!"

"Don't 'Mrs. Jundy' me, Mrs. Banks, ma'am, but keep that brat of yours in order. I shall tell Master Chris everything, and if trouble comes you've only got yourselves to blame—pulling mountains down on your own heads like Samson." And Sarah swept out of the shop, her little figure trembling with anger.

"You've done it now, Dolly," cried Mrs. Banks, weeping with fear. "We'll lose our lease for sure."

"Pshaw, mother! Chris isn't Mrs. Baltin to bully us in that way. And what's more, he can't bully us," said Dolly viciously. "I know a thing or two which will put a spoke in his wheel."

"Dolly, what *do* you mean?"

"Never mind what I mean, mother, but mind the shop. I'm off to see Dr. Pess, and show Sarah Jundy as she can't insult me for nothing."

"Dolly! Dolly!" Mrs. Banks laid hold of Dolly's skirts to prevent her from going out, but in vain. Dolly did go out in a whirlwind of passion, while her mother sat down behind the counter to weep. "I never did see such things as are going on," wailed Mrs. Banks. "Earthquakes is nothing to them."

Dolly had hastily put on her hat, and had flung aside her apron, so she looked quite smart enough to pay her visit. With a frowning face and an angry heart she tore through the village street, as if swift motion would enable her to grow calmer. And it did, for by the time Miss Banks reached Dr. Pess's house at the far end of the village, in the opposite direction to that in which the church was situated, she was fairly composed. She paused at the door of the quaint old red-brick house before knocking in order to arrange her ideas, and then rapped loudly. Shortly a neat maidservant appeared, and, not being

a friend of Dolly's, asked her business frigidly. Dolly bluntly requested to see the doctor, and was shown into the room by the girl.

"You can wait here until master is ready," said the maid disdainfully. "He's got a patient with him."

"None of your airs and graces, Amelia Quod," said Miss Banks tartly, "or I'll ask the doctor to turn you away."

This speech so angered Amelia Quod that she put her arms akimbo and told Miss Banks what she thought of her. Dolly returned the compliment, as she felt a quarrel would soothe her, and the two were at it hammer and tongs when the doctor's bell rang. Amelia flounced away, and returned to usher the visitor into her master's consulting-room, breathing fire and fury in her ear all the time. She shut the door with a bang when Dolly was in the room, and then went to talk over matters with the cook in the kitchen. Cook agreed that Miss Banks was a minx of the worst, and that Jem Trap was making a rod for his back in marrying her. So Dolly's visit caused quite a breeze.

And Miss Banks made another breeze in the consulting-room, as she had fully made up her mind to enlist Pess on the side of Larcher's enemies. Dolly did not go to work immediately in rousing the doctor's suspicions, but began by pretending that she wanted a tonic.

"I'm run down," said Dolly, with a sob, as she sank with feigned weakness into a chair. "The way I've been worried and harried and banged about has got on my nerves."

"You look the picture of health," returned Pess, with a shrug; "it's imagination."

"It isn't. Because my cheeks are red you say that,

doctor. But I can't eat and I can't sleep, and I'm that weak as a child could knock me down."

Pess examined her and tapped her and sounded her, and then stood up to declare that organically she was perfectly sound. "Lungs, heart, liver, and all the rest of you are as healthy as can be."

"Then why am I so worried?" asked Dolly, leading up to her point.

"Have you any mental trouble?"

"Yes, I have; trouble of the worst. But I daren't tell any one."

"Tell me," said Pess stolidly. "I'm father-confessor to lots of people."

"Are you father-confessor to Mr. Larcher?" asked Dolly slyly. "Has he told you what happened on the night of the Bank holiday?"

The little rubicund man grew pale, and stopped rubbing his hands in a comfortable way, as he was doing when Dolly fired her bombshell. "What do you mean by that?" he asked, with a scared look.

"Mrs. Baltin was murdered on Bank holiday night."

"Well? Well? Well?"

"She intended to make a new will on the day after and leave all she had to you."

"Well? Well? Well?"

"Do you think," said Dolly pointedly, "that Mr. Larcher was pleased you should get what was rightfully his?"

"I see what you're getting at," cried Pess, rubbing his bald head with a vexed and bewildered air. "You are about to make a dangerous accusation. Don't!"

"Yes, I shall, doctor. I believe that Mr. Larcher murdered his aunt to prevent her making that new will."

"Don't talk stuff and nonsense!" said Pess angrily.

and with an alarmed look, for he saw that the girl was dangerous. "Chris—I mean Mr. Larcher knew that I did not want the property."

"You—did—not—want—the—property?" said Miss Banks slowly, and gasping with sheer astonishment.

"No, I didn't," retorted the doctor irritably. "I told Mrs. Baltin as much, and I told Mr. Larcher that if the property was left to me I would make a deed of gift in his favour."

"Oh, you never meant to be such a fool!" said Dolly, carried out of her manners by this crazy statement.

"Don't talk to me like that!" said Pess crossly. "It is not the language to which I am accustomed from people of your low class. Go away! There's nothing the matter with you. You have only come here to make mischief."

"Have I?" Dolly rose and looked at him straightly. "I'd better make mischief with you than with the police."

"The police? What have you to say about the police?"

"I'll say this to the police—to that Inspector Hixon, who has charge of the case—that Mr. Larcher murdered his aunt."

"He didn't!"

"He did! If he is innocent what was he doing sneaking out of the postern gate of the park at half-past ten o'clock on that night?"

"He was not," gasped Pess, confounded by this statement.

"He was," insisted Dolly, "and that's what I've come to tell you. You have lost the money, and, whatever you may say, you're angry about it."

"I'm not!"

"Yes, you are! 'Tisn't in human nature not to be angry at losing such a lot, doctor," said Miss Banks obstinately, "and Chris—I mean Mr. Larcher wasn't going to lose it. He went to the Manor House from Mrs. Pike's on that night and strangled his aunt. Then he sneaked out, as I say."

"How do you know this?" asked Pess, very agitated, for Dolly's account was so circumstantial that he began to suspect Chris.

"Because me and Jem Trap were walking round the park wall—outside of it—on the night in question," said Dolly boldly. "The village even at that hour of nine and ten and eleven o'clock was noisy. Me and Jem walked away for quietness, and I saw and he saw Chris stealing out of the postern gate at half-past ten or thereabouts."

"You must be mistaken."

"I ain't; you ask Jem. And Mrs. Baltin was murdered at ten, as Dr. Swift said at the inquest, so Chris had just time to strangle her and steal her diamonds and get away when we saw him."

"But Sarah Jundy came to Mrs. Pike's long after eleven to say that Mrs. Baltin was dead. Mrs. Pike was present when Sarah arrived, and she says that Mr. Larcher was thunderstruck."

"All acting," scoffed Dolly viciously. "I dessay Sarah Jundy has something to do with the murder also, as when Jem was listening to Mrs. Baltin and Miss Hesmond behind the tree in the park he heard as she was discharged. Anyhow, as you've lost the property, I've come to tell you this so that you can tell the police."

"I shall certainly tell the police if what you say is true."

"I'm ready to swear on my soul that it's true," snapped Dolly positively.

"Hum!" said Pess, startled and worried. "I heard that you wanted to marry Mr. Larcher, and that he wouldn't have anything to do with you."

"It's that Amelia Quod as I've just had a row with as told you that."

"I don't talk of such things with my servants," said Pess stiffly. "But is it not true?"

"No, it ain't," lied Dolly boldly. "I am engaged to Jem Trap, and we are walking out together. Amelia would like to marry Jem herself, and that's why she told you lies about me."

"She did not tell me anything. I heard what I did hear from some one else."

"Give me her name, and I'll have the law on her," cried Dolly ferociously.

"No, I shan't give her name. As to what you have told me——"

"It's true! It's true!" interrupted Dolly eagerly. "I swear it's as true as true can be. As to Chris—I mean Mr. Larcher, he did pay me attentions, but as I was walking out with Jem I never paid any heed to them."

"What about the fight between Mr. Larcher and Jem?"

"Oh, that was because Mr. Larcher would try and kiss me," said Miss Banks in a glib way. "Chris—I'm going to call him Chris because he asked me to—got the better of Jem, but if they meet again Jem will beat him. Well, you can say or do what you like, doctor; but if you don't tell the police I shall."

"I am quite sure you will," said Pess slowly. "You are a bad-hearted girl, and I don't believe a word you say. Mr. Larcher never paid you attentions, or, if he did, they were only innocent attentions. You wanted to marry him."

"I didn't! I didn't! I didn't!"

"Yes, you did. But as he was in love with Miss Dene he refused to have anything to do with you. All your talk is the spite of a disappointed woman."

"How dare you say that?" cried Dolly, turning a deep red, and shaking her fist under the little doctor's nose. "You are a mean-spirited coward to lose this property. You're afraid of Chris."

"I'm not. But Chris is my friend."

"Is he? A nice friend, I don't think, to diddle you out of a lot of money by murdering his aunt."

"Can you swear that what you say is true?"

"Take me to Inspector Hixon and I'll swear on the Book. And you can swear Jem, too. He saw Chris, as I did."

Pess hesitated. Much as he liked Chris, he was beginning to suspect him of committing the crime. Naturally, Chris did not wish to lose the money, as without it he would not be able to marry Alice. And, naturally, he might have believed that if he, Pess, got the money he would stick to it, notwithstanding his offer to make a deed of gift. Then, if Chris had been at the Manor House immediately after the old lady had been murdered, he certainly must know something about the crime. Therefore his behaviour when Sarah Jundy called with the news was all acting, as Dolly suggested. The more Pess thought the more certain he became that Miss Banks was speaking the truth. All the same, he did not wish to move in the matter until he was more certain.

"Will you leave things in my hands?" he asked the girl, who was watching him.

Dolly nodded. "If you'll go for Chris."

"I shall tell Hixon what you say when I think it is necessary to do so. He will call you and Trap to swear to what you say. Are you prepared to do this?"

"Yes, we are. Jem will do what I tell him."

"Then hold your tongue for a week, until I make further inquiries."

"I want Chris arrested at once," said Dolly sullenly.

"Then he won't be. You let me manage things. If Mr. Larcher is guilty he will be punished, as Mrs. Baltin was a dear, good friend to me, and I wish to avenge her death. All I ask of you is to hold your tongue for one week."

"Right oh!" said Dolly rather sulkily, as she could do nothing else. "But if you don't make a row in a week I shall."

After making all the mischief she could Miss Banks withdrew, and left the doctor to think over the dangerous communication she had made to him. He liked Chris, but, all the same, he was determined not to spare Chris if he had murdered that defenceless old woman. In the bottom of Pess's heart, notwithstanding all his asseverations that he did not want the property, there may have lurked a regret that he had lost it. From a friend he was gradually coming to survey Chris as an enemy. And yet his old friendly feelings were not yet swamped by hostile ones. Pess felt very perplexed, and, as he was not able to decide what to do unaided, he sought counsel as usual of his friends the spirits. He resolved to ask them.

Taking up a pencil and arranging a sheet of paper on the desk, Pess allowed himself to become as impersonal as was possible, closing his eyes to get the effect as soon as he could. The pencil was lightly held in his fingers with the point resting on the paper. Mentally the doctor asked if Chris was guilty of the crime, but the pencil did not write as he expected. Then he asked what he should do under the circumstances. The pencil at once began to move, at first slowly and then quickly. When it stopped Pess opened his eyes to read the following message :

“ Go to Miss Hesmond, and tell her what the girl has told you. Be guided by what she advises.”

Discontented with the message, Pess tried again, but there was no response. He therefore made up his mind to take the advice of the writing, although it was much against his grain to do so. In ten minutes he was on his way to Miss Hesmond's cottage.

“ I wonder if she knows that Chris is guilty? ”
Pess asked himself, as he walked along.

CHAPTER XIV

HIXON

MISS HESMOND was pleased. Things were not going so well as she wished, yet, on the whole, were better than she expected, considering the circumstances. Chris was now rapidly mastering all business connected with his new position, and seemed likely to settle down into being a staid landlord ; while Alice, in spite of Felk's persecution and the worrying of her father, was remaining true to her love. Whenever it was possible Miss Hesmond asked the girl to her cottage, where Chris was invariably to be found at the moment, so that the lovers saw much of one another. As soon as Larcher had the affairs of his estate fully in hand the old maid intended to urge him to marry Alice at once. Ordinarily the little lady did not approve of clandestine unions, and would have preferred that Dene's consent should be first obtained for the marriage. But the vicar was so obstinate and so swayed by the wiles of Felk that she considered it best for the young couple to take their own way in the face of parental authority. Their life's happiness was at stake, and Miss Hesmond was determined that the same should not be wrecked by Dene's mulishness. She was wholly on the side of the lovers, and with all her heart urged the completion of their romance.

The old maid was rather surprised when Dr. Pess made his appearance in her tiny drawing-room, and was surprised also to see how anxious and worried he looked. Aware of her dislike to his spiritualism, Pess had not much to do with Miss Hesmond, and usually kept out of her way to avoid unnecessary argument.

On the occasion of his former visit he had been greatly annoyed by the manner in which she had talked, and was determined to give the old woman no other chance of meddling in his business. But the communication of Dolly and the message from the spirits forced him to see Miss Hesmond again. All the same, he by no means intended to be guided by her, a decision which said very little for his faith in the inhabitants of the next world. As a matter of fact, Pess believed just as much as he chose to believe, twisting and turning messages to suit his own whims. Although the present communication was clear enough, the little man decided that all that the spirits required him to do was to listen to Miss Hesmond, and then decide for himself as to what was best to be done. The doctor was unwilling to become involved in another argument with his hostess regarding the Unseen, and, therefore, made up his mind to say nothing or as little as he could about the message. What with these doubts and the knowledge, true or false, that Chris was guilty, it was not to be wondered at that Pess felt and looked unhappy. Miss Hesmond commented upon his ruffled appearance at once.

"What's the matter with you, doctor?" she asked, when they were both seated in the drawing-room and the door was closed. "You don't look well."

"I am worried," said Pess, rubbing his hands with an unhappy expression.

"So I see. Well, can I do anything for you? I am always ready to help."

"I know you are," replied the doctor dryly, and intimating that she was meddlesome, "and in this case your help is necessary, unless you wish to see Chris get into trouble."

"Of course I don't wish to see Chris get into

trouble," said Miss Hesmond serenely. "All the same, trouble is bound to come to him before things are made smooth. And trouble won't do him so much harm as good, doctor."

"Then you have heard——"

"I have heard nothing to worry me. All I know is that Chris is doing well as the squire of Wichley, and that, in spite of Mr. Dene's opposition, he will marry Alice when the time comes. Things at present are tolerably smooth."

"Then what is this trouble you are expecting to befall him?"

"I don't know." Miss Hesmond passed her hand across her forehead with a nervous gesture. "But trouble has to come. I have been told so."

"From the Other Side?" asked Pess eagerly.

Miss Hesmond nodded "Yes. But not by one of those earth-bound spirits you consult. They know little more than they did on earth, and can do you no good."

Pess, in his excitement, made up his mind to speak about the message, although he had determined not to do so. "Would you be surprised to hear that a communication from one of the spirits you despise brought me here this morning?"

"No," said Miss Hesmond roundly, "I would not. On occasions the truth may be sent through them. Tell me what the message is—tell me exactly."

But Pess had no intention of doing this. He reported the first sentence of the writing and left out the last. "Go to Miss Hesmond, and tell her what the girl has told you," he repeated glibly.

"That is the message?"

"Yes."

"Who is the girl?"

"Dolly Banks."

"Oh!" murmured Miss Hesmond. "I thought that the trouble to Chris would come from that quarter. Well, doctor, and what is this girl plotting now?"

"What makes you think that she is plotting?" asked Pess in his turn.

"She fell in love with Chris, and wanted him to marry her, although there was no reason why he should, and never will be," said the old maid emphatically. "He refused to have anything to do with her, and, naturally, she is doing her best to make mischief. It was Dolly, I am sure, who set afloat those rumours in the village that Chris had something to do with the death of his aunt."

"I agree with you," said Pess promptly; "and now she has come to me to accuse Chris of the crime."

"Well, Dolly is not the girl to stick at much if she can harm Chris. But on what grounds does she base her accusation?"

"On such excellent grounds, Miss Hesmond, that I begin to believe Chris is really implicated in the murder."

The doctor quite expected Miss Hesmond to start to her feet and denounce him as a false friend. But she did nothing of the sort. Rather did she strive to show him that he was making up his mind too hastily. "You have known Chris for many years," she observed quietly, "and you must be aware how honourable and straightforward he is. Dolly has a reason to smirch his character, as she is angry with him because he refused to marry her. It is only fair to give Chris an opportunity of defending himself."

"I don't see how he can defend himself against the plain facts," said the doctor with acerbity.

"What are the plain facts?"

Pess laid them before her, and repeated in full the story told to him by the ingenious Miss Banks. "What do you make of that?" he asked triumphantly.

"I make nothing of it, and shall make nothing of it until I hear what Chris has to say."

"You will ask him to explain?"

Miss Hesmond reflected. "No," she said at length, and with decision; "that is, until it becomes necessary I shall not trouble him with this gossip."

"You will have to trouble him soon, then," retorted Pess angrily, "for I intend to tell the police what I have told you."

"I shouldn't do that if I were you until we can be more certain that Dolly is speaking the truth. On the face of it, she desires to hurt Chris and to prevent his marriage with Alice. There are no lengths to which a jealous woman will not go, doctor."

"Has Dolly any true reason to dislike Chris?"

"No, she has not. The whole trouble was begun and carried on and ended by herself. Chris paid her attentions, as he did to all other pretty girls, and she took these attentions as serious. Chris has been foolish, but nothing more, and Dolly is merely disappointed because she has not captured a rich husband."

"Did she love him?"

"She did not. I can set your mind at rest on that point. Dolly loves no one but herself. It is sheer rage which is making her act in this way. For my part I don't believe there is a word of truth in what she says. Jem Trap, to whom she is engaged, is much more likely to have murdered Mrs. Baltin, as he said that he would get even with her when she thrashed him in my presence. I think the best thing for you to do, doctor, is to wait until you are more certain of the truth before communicating with the police."

Pess reflected, and remembered how the spirits had told him to be guided by Miss Hesmond's advice. He was not inclined to accept this command, and, at the same time, did not see the necessity of setting the

heather on fire unless he was able to do so thoroughly. Dolly, after all, might be telling lies, and if the police acted on such lies the failure—if failure there was—would recoil on her head and on his own. Finally, he agreed to a compromise. “I shall wait for twenty-four hours,” he said sullenly, “no longer.”

Miss Hesmond looked at him seriously and searchingly. “I hardly know you, Dr. Pess. You have always been cheery and kindly and honourable. Now you are not the same man.”

“Do you dare to say that I am not acting honourably?” inquired Pess violently.

“I don’t think you are. Chris is your friend, and yet you are taking the word of a jealous woman to stir up trouble against him.”

“Chris *was* my friend, Miss Hesmond, but he is no longer my friend now that he appears to have had something to do with the death of his aunt. Mrs. Baltin was always kind to me, and I think it right that her death should be avenged.”

“Not on the wrong person,” said Miss Hesmond firmly, and rose to intimate that the interview had lasted long enough. “You have not sufficient grounds to prove that Chris is guilty.”

“I shall leave the task of proving his guilt to the police,” said Pess in a sulky way. “And, believe me, I am not actuated by any feeling of anger that Chris has got the money which Mrs. Baltin intended to leave to me.”

“I quite agree with you, doctor. You did not want the money, and if you had got the money you would have given it by deed of gift to Chris, as you said in this very room and in my presence. If you are only true to yourself, you will remain friendly with Chris, and refuse to submit to the control of this evil spirit which is obsessing you.”

Pess stared. "Nothing and no one is obsessing me," he said resentfully.

"I tell you, doctor, that your surrender of your free-will has permitted some evil thing to take possession of you at intervals. It might be that the spirit of that unhappy Simon Grain who committed suicide and longed for revenge is using your body."

"I am myself now."

"Yes—more or less. But every now and then you speak quite different to your real self. How far the mischief has gone I cannot say, but you may be sure that I shall defend Chris——"

"Against me?"

"No, against this enemy of Chris who has taken possession of you. *You* are all right, doctor, and you are the friend of Chris. But this creature from out the unknown who governs you every now and then hates Chris, and would willingly work him an injury. And I believe," added Miss Hesmond, bending forward to whisper, "that this creature has in some way brought about the death of that miserable woman."

"Are you speaking of Simon Grain?"

"Yes, I am. An ordinary person, doctor, would think that we were both talking crazy rubbish. But you know and I know that there is much in existence about which the ordinary person knows nothing. Chris has to pass through trouble, and so has Alice. I was told as much, although the quarter whence the trouble would come was not indicated. It seems that you are to be the means of making the trouble—and yet not you, but this entity, this dead man, who is using your body. Let me tell you that in the end Chris will win clear, and all will be well with him and with Alice. But you——" She paused.

"What about me?" demanded the doctor, impressed but obstinate.

"You," said Miss Hesmond with emphasis, "will end your days in a lunatic asylum. That or drunkenness is often the fate of those who surrender their bodies as mediums. Only by reassuming your birth-right of free-will, only by refusing to give any spirit from the other side a home in your body, can you hope to escape."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried Pess, rising, with an angry look. "The spirits have always taught me lofty and noble things."

"Evil spirits sometimes come as angels of light," said Miss Hesmond gravely, "and lure their victim into the toils by lofty teaching. When it is too late, and the bird is snared, then they throw off the mask. But this Simon Grain, I am sure, makes no secret of what he desires to do. He suffered at the hands of Mrs. Baltin, and in some way he has managed to bring about her death. Now—if I can judge from your attitude—he is working through you to harm Chris. *You* are not the enemy of Chris, but Simon Grain is."

"You cannot be sure of what you say?"

"No, I am not sure. I have had no message to tell me the truth. All I know is that Chris and Alice have to endure trouble before they are united. I may be wrong about Simon Grain wishing to harm Chris; but I am *not* wrong about his using your body, which you gave up freely to him. You speak of Chris in a way quite different to your ordinary tone, and—and——. Oh, there"—Miss Hesmond again drew her hand across her forehead—"go, doctor, and let matters stand as they are until we learn more. I am quite tired with the strain of this interview."

"I am going," said Pess, walking towards the door, "and I don't believe a word you say. I shall wait twenty-four hours. Then, if Chris cannot prove his innocence, I shall inform the police of what Dolly says."

I don't want trouble, and I don't want money, but I do want to punish the murderer of my good and kind friend Mrs. Baltin. So now you know my intentions."

"They will result in nothing," said Miss Hesmond quietly, and dismissed him.

The old maid was very worried, as she did not see her way clear. It was in her mind to send to Chris and ask for an explanation, but this she did not do, as she was aware of the young man's impetuous character, and thought that he might make bad worse. Miss Hesmond considered, after reflection, that there must be some truth in Dolly's story, or she would not dare to tell it in so brazen a manner. And, if there was truth, Chris would be placed in a very awkward position, as, notwithstanding all his denials, the mere fact that he left the Manor House after the death of his aunt would tell heavily against him. Undoubtedly, if Pess went to see the police, Chris would be arrested on suspicion, and then the disgrace would break Alice's heart. Since Dolly had infected Pess with her own revengeful spirit—which was the most reasonable explanation of his changed attitude towards Larcher—it was probable that either he or she would make what they knew public. But Dolly evidently intended to leave the matter to the doctor, and he had agreed not to move for twenty-four hours. Much might happen in that time, as Miss Hesmond thought, so she strove to possess her soul in patience and await events.

She had not long to wait, for late in the afternoon she had another visitor, a wholly unexpected one, whose appearance startled her greatly. The card which was brought into her as she sat knitting bore the name of Orlando Hixon, and, although his official title was not given, Miss Hesmond knew well enough that this was the inspector in charge of the murder case. For a moment she felt inclined to refuse to see

him; but, as it always was her way to face the music boldly and dare the worst, she gave orders to her neat little maid for his admission. Then the old woman masked her uneasiness with a smile, and prepared to do battle for Chris. Hixon could have called on no other errand but one connected with the late tragedy, and Miss Hesmond wondered if Dolly had been to see him and tell her story. It was with some dismay that she saw the tall, soldierly man enter her little room.

"You are doubtless surprised to see me," said Hixon, with a smile lighting up his dark face, "but I must recall to your recollection the fact that you knew my mother when you and she were at school together. Rachel Mask was her name, and you were, I believe, great friends."

"Dear me!" said Miss Hesmond, shaking hands cordially, and feeling that a load was removed from her mind. "Of course I remember Rachel. We were the best of friends; but after her marriage with your father we drifted apart."

"She never forgot you, however," said Hixon, taking a chair which was much too low for his tall figure, "and always wished to see you again. When I was over here looking into that murder case, I heard your name, and wrote to my mother in Yorkshire about you. She begged me to come and see you. For that reason I am here."

Miss Hesmond had long since noticed that Hixon was in mufti, and this explanation showed that he was paying quite a private visit, and one wholly unconnected with the duties of his profession. The old maid drew a long breath of relief. He had not come about her boy's business, and it was probable that he knew nothing of the rumours which Dolly Banks had set afloat. Miss Hesmond ordered in tea, and talked to

Hixon about his mother and about himself and about her own everyday doings in the village ; but nothing was said about the death of Mrs. Baltin. Miss Hesmond however intended to allude to that later, as she wished to enlist the inspector on the side of Chris.

" I have a fortnight's holiday," said Hixon voluntarily, and while drinking his tea, " so I thought that I would spend it in Wichley."

" I cannot flatter myself that it was wholly to see me," said Miss Hesmond, with a faint smile, yet anxiously.

" Well, no. Of course, when I received my mother's letter I made up my mind to call and give you her address that you might write to her. But another reason for my stay here is that I wish to get to the bottom of this murder case."

" I thought that was all settled."

" In one way, yes ; in another way, no," said Hixon, with a shrug. " I am not at all satisfied with the verdict."

" I don't see what other verdict could be given on the evidence set before the coroner and jury," remarked Miss Hesmond quietly.

" No more do I," assented the man heartily ; " but, you see, I could not get any evidence of any weight to place before the jury. On the face of it, it seems as though some expert London criminal came down to rob Mr. Felk's house and Mrs. Baltin's. He saw no one while he was robbing that stockbroker, and so no murder was committed. He saw Mrs. Baltin, who happened to be sitting up late when he made his second venture, and so did more than he intended."

" Then you believe that a London thief did commit the murder ? "

" I am not sure. On the face of it, as I say, Miss Hesmond, I can say no more than the coroner and jury

said. But I do feel certain that there is something more in the matter than appears on the surface. For this reason I am taking a 'busman's holiday, and am employing my time in asking questions. But really I shouldn't bother you with all this professional truck," he ended apologetically, and with a smile.

"No, don't stop; please go on," said the old maid hastily. "I am very much interested in this case. Mr. Larcher, who succeeded to the property, is a dear friend of mine."

"Oh!" said Hixon somewhat dryly. "And Mrs. Baltin?"

"I knew her but slightly. She was not a very agreeable woman, and we did not get on well together."

"I should think, Miss Hesmond, that any one would get on well with you."

"Thank you for a very pretty compliment," said Miss Hesmond, with a smile which made her plain face beautiful; "but so far as Mrs. Baltin was concerned I was a complete failure. Her views were not my views, and as her views were dangerous I spoke to her about them. Naturally I was called meddlesome and all the rest of it. That is always the fate of those who wish to help any one."

"Why were her views dangerous?" asked Hixon abruptly.

"She believed in spiritualism."

"Oh!" Hixon shrugged his square shoulders. "I fear I am too practical a man to believe in such rubbish."

Miss Hesmond did not argue the point. She never did with people who spoke in this decidedly crude way. "Let us leave that question on one side," she said in her quiet manner, "and tell me if you have found anything likely to show that any one other than a London thief committed the murder."

"Well," said Hixon doubtfully, "I don't know if I ought to talk to you about my business. But I can say this, as it is public property, if I can judge from the gossip at the Red Horse, where I stayed last night. It seems that your friend Mr. Larcher quarrelled with his aunt and left her house. Also it was stated that she had decided to make a new will, but was prevented from doing so by her untimely death."

Miss Hesmond nodded. "I have heard all this. Do you believe on these grounds that Mr. Larcher is guilty?"

"No. It certainly seems odd that his aunt should have died violently in time to save him from losing the property. All the same, I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Larcher seemed to me to be a fine young fellow and a real good sort."

"He's all that," said Miss Hesmond heartily.

"You are his friend, anyhow."

"His best friend. Later I shall tell you how I became his best friend. In the meantime I wish to explain that he loves the vicar's daughter."

"Yes?" said Hixon interrogatively, and wondering what this had to do with him.

"And she is also loved by a man named Felk."

"Yes?"

"Do you know the name?"

"No. I heard the name and saw the gentleman for the first time in connection with the burglary at his house. Why?"

Miss Hesmond reflected for a few moments before replying "You may perhaps believe me to be a dreamer and a fantastical kind of woman, but——"

"My mother always said you were singularly plain-spoken and practical," interrupted the inspector quietly. "So far as I can judge, you have not changed."

"Thank you for another compliment," answered the old maid, with a pretty flush. "Well, then, Mr. Hixon, I don't like Mr. Felk. He is a bad man. I can give you no reason for thinking so—that is, none which you would accept. But I should like you to take this photograph which Mr. Felk gave to Miss Alice Dene and make inquiries about him in London."

Hixon whistled, and examined the portrait carefully. "He's not so weak as he looks," was his verdict; "I thought that when I saw him."

"I believe he is a clever and wicked man," cried Miss Hesmond vehemently.

"Hum! And you think that he may have something to do with the death of——"

"No, no! I don't say that."

"You hint it, anyhow."

"Well, I do," admitted the old woman reluctantly. "It may be all moonshine, I know; but I don't think any harm will be done if you make inquiries. I am very anxious to prevent Miss Dene from marrying him, and I wish to see her married to Christopher Larcher."

Hixon slipped the photograph into his inner pocket, and pondered. He began to think that he would gain great assistance from his mother's friend, as she seemed to know a good deal. "Hum!" he said again. "I'll look up the past of this man Felk as best I can on two conditions."

"Yes?"

"One is that you invite me here to meet Mr. Larcher as a friend and not as a police-officer. The other is that you will tell me everything you know."

"Agreed," said the old maid promptly. "You shall meet Chris, and he shall tell you himself about the truth or untruth of these rumours. Is it a bargain?"

"It's a bargain," said Hixon, smiling; and the two shook hands warmly.

CHAPTER XV

LARCHER'S STORY

MISS HESMOND found it easy to bring about a meeting between Chris and the inspector. In any case it was not difficult to do this, as all she had to do was to invite both the men to afternoon tea, which, owing to her poverty, was the utmost extent of Miss Hesmond's hospitality. But it so happened that the very morning after Hixon's unexpected visit Chris called to see the old lady, and gave her an opportunity of arranging the business sooner than she expected. Larcher was much distressed, and his distress showed itself in his face. Usually this was bright and cheery, but when he presented himself at the cottage on this occasion it was overcast. It was not at all like Chris to be so doleful, and Miss Hesmond told him as much in her brisk way.

"You look as though you had lost sixpence and found a penny," she added, when he entered the room.

"I have reason to look rotten," acknowledged the young man in his free-and-easy way. "That little devil Dolly has been making mischief."

"She would, my dear boy. But don't call her names, as that does no good. After all, it is your own fault that she hates you."

"I know, I know ; but don't rub it in."

"I won't," said Miss Hesmond soothingly ; "and it is a shame of me to say what I did say, as you have quite enough trouble to face without my making more. At the same time, my dear boy, do cultivate a sense of humour, and try to look on the bright side of things."

"There is no bright side at present that I can see,"

said Chris grimly. "Dolly is determined to implicate me in the death of my aunt."

"Oh indeed!" said Miss Hesmond, concealing her knowledge of the matter. "And how does she intend to manage that?"

Chris sat down, and, putting his hands in his pockets, stared gloomily at the carpet. "She came to see me at seven last night, and openly accused me of being concerned in the murder. She said that the one desire she had was to see me hanged. Nice sort of girl, isn't she?"

"'Hell has no fury like a woman scorned,'" quoted the old lady gravely. "And what did you reply?"

"I told her that what she believed was not true, although what she did say was true."

"I don't quite understand."

"It's rather hard, but you would understand if I explained."

"Naturally I should," said Miss Hesmond dryly. "Well?"

Chris hesitated, and rose and looked out of the window. "I don't think that I can tell you just now."

"Why not?" Miss Hesmond seemed to be pained. "You know that I am your best friend."

"There is no reason why I should pile all my troubles on your shoulders, all the same," argued Chris doubtfully.

"If they are willing shoulders, why not? Chris"—she took his hand—"if you will not tell me, will you tell Inspector Hixon?"

"Tell him?" Chris snatched away his hand, and recoiled with a look of dismay. "Impossible! If I told him all, he would arrest me at once."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Quite as bad. Circumstances are too much for me, and I don't see how I can clear myself."

"Have you been acting foolishly, Chris?"

"No—that is, I don't think I have. What I did was perfectly natural under the circumstances, but my actions give Dolly a handle against me."

Miss Hesmond started. With the knowledge of what Pess had told her in her mind she wondered if Dolly's story was true. Chris implied that it was, although he was not aware that the statement had been made to Pess and afterwards to his hostess. Miss Hesmond, however, was too wise to press for an explanation, since she saw that the young man was unwilling to make one at the moment. "However, I should advise you to tell Mr. Hixon of your trouble," she remarked finally.

"That would be placing my head in the lion's mouth."

"Oh, I don't think the lion would bite it off," said Miss Hesmond, with a smile. "He really is a very nice lion."

"Hixon?"

"Yes. Chris, my dear, he called to see me yesterday in order to tell me about his mother. She and I were schoolfellows, and Mr. Hixon very kindly wants to bring us together again."

"Did you speak about the death of my aunt?" asked Chris, wheeling round, with an anxious air.

"Oh, yes; and Mr. Hixon has heard all the gossip of the villagers."

"Dolly's lies," commented Chris cynically.

"Are they all lies?" asked the old lady sharply.

"No. They are half-lies, the worst of their kind. Well, and does Hixon believe that I murdered my aunt to get her money?"

"No. But he remarked that it was odd your aunt should have died in the way she did before she could make a new will disinheriting you."

"It's natural that he should put it that way. Hum!" Chris turned towards the window again. "I'm between the devil and the deep sea."

"Then go towards the deep sea," advised Miss Hesmond promptly.

"Hixon?"

"Precisely. He is a real nice fellow, and a kind-hearted one also. His mother was my dearest friend at school, and for her sake Mr. Hixon will do his best for you at my request. I told him, Chris dear, that you were like a son to me."

"I know, I know." Larcher laid his hand on her shoulder affectionately. "You are all that is good and sweet. I am in a hole; there's no denying that, as Dolly is bent upon my ruin. Perhaps it would be best, as you say, to tell all to Hixon. There is safety in boldness."

Miss Hesmond nodded approvingly. "I have always found it best to walk boldly up to the cannon's mouth."

"Then I'll do it," said Chris valiantly. "I don't like doing it, but I shall because you advise it."

"Good!" said the old lady approvingly. "That's spoken like a man. Come this afternoon, Chris, and Mr. Hixon will be here. Just now he is staying at the Red Horse. It was there that he heard the gossip set afloat by Dolly."

Chris nodded in his turn. "Is Hixon staying there officially?"

"No; he is on a holiday."

"Then why is he bothering about business?"

"Well," said Miss Hesmond reflectively, "he remarked himself that he was taking a 'busman's holiday. He was not pleased with the verdict of the jury at the inquest, although he admits that no other verdict could be given on the evidence procurable. Therefore,

Chris, he has come over to Wichley to look into matters for himself."

"In that case it is more necessary than ever I should tell him what I know, Miss Hesmond. Does he suspect Jem Trap?"

"No. He said nothing about Jem Trap."

"Often it has occurred to me," said Larcher musingly, "that Trap may have a trifle more to do with my aunt's death than we think. She gave him every cause to hate her. Dolly may wish to accuse me so as to protect Jem, to whom she is engaged."

"I don't think she wishes to protect any one," said Miss Hesmond with asperity. "All she desires to do is to make things hot for you. And it seems from your hints that she can do so. She has turned Dr. Pess against you."

"Yes. She said something about having told Pess lies, and that is another reason why I wish to speak plainly to Hixon. But Pess is now against me because he has lost the property."

"No, no, no! Pess declares that he has enough money for his needs, and does not want what is rightfully yours. You heard him say in this very room that if Mrs. Baltin *did* will the estate to him he would make it over to you by deed of gift."

"Oh, yes; and he meant that at the time. But you evidently have not heard that through the failure of the Tudor Bank the other day Pess has lost all his money. He is now quite poor, so under the circumstances it is natural that he should regret losing Wichley and hate me for having it."

"Dear me!" said Miss Hesmond sympathetically. "I did not know that the doctor had such bad fortune. He called to see me yesterday, but told me nothing about his loss."

"He doesn't want it known, I expect. It was

Armour who told me when I was in Town yesterday. Oh, I know that Pess has turned against me. I told him so."

"Have you seen him?"

"I met him on my way here, and we had a few words. His manner was so hostile that I said he had changed."

"What did he say?"

"He turned on his heel and went away. But I'm sure that he'll do his best to make things warm for me, since he has lost the money."

"Well, you see, he is obsessed by the spirit of Simon Grain."

"Dear Miss Hesmond, I don't wish to say a word against your beliefs," said Chris, with a shrug, "but I don't credit them. And, after all, Pess has quite enough reason to hate me for spoiling his chance of getting money without being governed by some shadow of a ghost."

"You didn't spoil his chance."

"No; but he thinks that I did, and Dolly with her lies is backing him up. Anyhow, I may be able to draw their teeth by an open confession to Hixon, and I'll come at four o'clock to make it. But you must allow *me* to introduce the subject, Miss Hesmond."

"You shall conduct the conversation in your own way," said the old lady promptly. "I know when to hold my tongue. And Alice?"

"I haven't seen her for two days. Do arrange for us to meet soon here. I hope that Felk isn't bothering her."

"Oh, yes, he is. He is always at her elbow."

"I'll break his neck!" cried Chris angrily.

"Be wise, and leave him alone," advised Miss Hesmond significantly. "The sins of Mr. Felk will come home to him."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like Mr. Felk, and I think he is a worse man than the vicar believes him to be. Mr. Felk gave his photograph to Alice, and I took it to give to Mr. Hixon. It is now in Mr. Hixon's possession."

"For what reason?"

"I thought that Mr. Hixon might make inquiries about Mr. Felk."

"But have you any reason to suspect that——"

"I have no reason that I can give you," said the old lady dryly, "or that I could give Mr. Hixon. My knowledge has to do with psychic matters, which, as you admitted just now, you do not believe in."

"I'm a practical man," said Chris, defending himself.

"To be psychic doesn't mean that one is a dreamer," said Miss Hesmond good-humouredly. "Chris, my dear, I can help you in many ways, but in some ways I am unable to help you. However, so long as you go on as you are doing all will be well. I don't expect too much from you."

"I don't understand."

"You never will understand until you reach a certain point in evolution."

"Ah! now you are becoming too deep for me," said Chris, with a laugh; and he went away feeling ever so much better for the conversation and for the determination he had arrived at.

The wise old maid was very satisfied that she had brought Chris to such a reasonable frame of mind. Apart from her unusual fund of common sense, Miss Hesmond had a clear and intellectual understanding of religion, which was of infinite service to her in maintaining a calm attitude and in helping others. Most people understand religion merely in an emotional manner, as they have not arrived at that point when

an intellectual explanation can be comprehended by them. Thus in time of trouble the length of their endurance depends upon the depth of their emotion—say, on their capability of blind faith. But Miss Hesmond possessed understanding faith, and knew to a great extent why such and such a trouble was bound to happen. Some things were hidden from her, as, even though she was possessed of greater knowledge than the ordinary person, that knowledge was necessarily limited because she was yet a human being in the human world. Still, she knew much, and was aware that Chris and Alice had to undergo certain trials so that they might be united more completely. Therefore she looked forward to these trials for those she loved with a serene assurance that they would come out of them in due time the better for their experience. In a word, the young couple were in the fiery furnace being refined for the purpose of further progress. And in no other way than by this trial could they be so refined.

All Miss Hesmond had to do was to provide means to bring this person and that together for the necessary purpose. So to speak, she had to set the stage for the performance of the play which was to be enacted, and when that was done she had to take her place as a spectator and allow the drama to work itself out to a foreseen end. The end she knew, but did not know how that end was to be brought about. Still, she knew that it was a sure end and a happy end, and made ready the stage for the meeting of Chris and Hixon with the belief that such a meeting would lead to future peace, even though peace was yet far off. She did not tell Chris this, as he would not have understood, and, moreover, the knowledge that a trial was impending might have disheartened him. Therefore Miss Hesmond kept her psychic

knowledge to herself, and met the actors in the drama with a serene and confident mien. They were not exactly puppets, and yet acted within certain limitations as to free-will. Both the inspector and Chris would have been surprised had they known how carefully things were being arranged to bring about a certain end.

The inspector was only a few years older than Chris, and had attained his position by hard work and uncommon smartness. He was a public school boy and a university man; therefore he got on very well with Chris, and the two found one another's company very congenial. Miss Hesmond gave them tea and bread and butter and cake. Then she gave them permission to smoke, and sat down with her knitting to supervise the ensuing play. Quite innocently her visitors glided from topics of sport and politics and amusements to the more serious ones which were the things for the discussion of which they had been brought together. It was Chris who began, as Hixon was too wary to commit himself to abruptly changing the subject. Nor was Larcher abrupt, but led up to what he wanted to say by talking about his fight with Jem Trap. And Hixon had brought forth that talk by discussing boxing.

"Jem Trap would be a good man if he was trained," said Chris, after he had heard the inspector's opinion of Wells and Carpentier and Jack Johnson. "He has strength and quickness, but he has no science. I licked him because I knew what I was about, but if he was trained there would be little chance for a light-weight like me."

"Jem Trap?" echoed Hixon, on the alert at once. "Ah, yes! I saw him in the taproom of the Red Horse. He is a big man, and looks hefty enough. By the way—I hope you don't mind my saying so,

Larcher, as I am not here officially—there are rumours about the man in connection with the death of Mrs. Baltin."

"Oh, those rumours are bosh!" said Chris abruptly. "Jem isn't at all a bad sort and wouldn't hurt a fly."

"He threatened Mrs. Baltin, however, I believe."

"I can give you the precise words he used," said Miss Hesmond, looking up, "as I was present when Jem trespassed in the park and Mrs. Baltin thrashed him. He went away, and called back, 'I'll make you pay for this, you old devil.'"

"Hum!" said Hixon sharply. "And do you think that he did make her pay?"

"I don't," said Chris doggedly. "Jem was angry at the moment, and did not intend what he called out. He's a good-natured sort of chap."

"But these rumours, which credit him with the crime——"

"Oh, as to that," struck in Larcher, with a shrug, "I am credited with the crime myself. Yes, you may look astonished; but people go about saying that I murdered my aunt to prevent her making a new will."

"I have heard those rumours also," said Hixon dryly; "but let me remind you, Larcher, that I am not here officially. Don't you think we had better change the subject? It's awkward for me."

"It's a deuced sight more awkward for *me*," said Chris frankly, "so I'm going to give you my version of the business."

Hixon's dark face flushed, and he looked uncomfortable. "I am here as Miss Hesmond's guest," he remarked, after a pause. "What does she say?"

"I say that Chris must tell you everything," said the old lady promptly. "It is that he should do so that I have brought you together. Chris is quite innocent, Mr. Hixon; you can take my word for it."

"I *am* innocent," said Larcher quickly. "All the same, circumstances are against me. Don't look so sick, Hixon. I am quite willing that you should become the official you actually are. Open confession is good for the soul, and I'm in such a hole that I want help."

"Hum!" said Hixon again with the boom of a bumble-bee. "If you were guilty, you certainly wouldn't thrust your head into the noose in this way. Say what you like, but remember that I have my duty to perform."

"Oh, you can act as you think best after I have told you everything. I am determined to face the worst and end this suspense. I can't have Dolly Banks going about telling lies."

"Who is Dolly Banks?"

"She is the daughter of Mrs. Banks, who keeps the grocer's shop and is the postmistress of Wichley," said Chris promptly. "I admired her, as she is pretty, and was fool enough to tell her so. She believed, without the least reason being given by me, that I intended to marry her, and when I became engaged to Miss Dene she made up her mind to ruin me."

"Let me speak," said Miss Hesmond quickly. "It is just as well that Mr. Hixon should understand things fully." And the old lady related the episode of the meeting in the church porch, and how Dolly's little plot had been brought to naught by her unseen presence.

Hixon nodded when she finished. "I can see that this girl hates Larcher, and will do her best to harm him. Well?"

"Well"—Miss Hesmond looked at Chris—"shall I tell or shall you?"

"Tell what?" asked Chris, rather astonished, as he was ignorant of what the old maid knew.

"Tell what Dolly told Dr. Pess and Dr. Pess told me."

"Oh! So Dolly has told you the story?"

"Yes. Shall I tell it to Mr. Hixon?"

Chris nodded. "It will do away with the need of my telling him. Go on."

Miss Hesmond looked at him approvingly, and then related how Dolly had seen Larcher leaving the Manor House shortly after ten o'clock, with full details.

"Is that a lie?" asked Hixon keenly.

"No," confessed Chris, "it is true."

"You *were* at the Manor House before ten?"

"No. I was at the Manor House shortly *after* ten, and left about half-past ten."

"Why did you go to the Manor House at that hour?" demanded Hixon, while Miss Hesmond listened breathlessly.

"Because I told my aunt that I would never enter the Manor House until she asked me herself. I was at Mrs. Pike's on that night."

"The first of August?"

"Yes. Mrs. Pike had gone to bed, and I was reading in my sitting-room. About a quarter to ten o'clock a knock came at the door, and I opened it to find Sarah Jundy, my aunt's maid. She came to say that my aunt had been having a séance with Dr. Pess, and after he left the Manor House my aunt told Sarah to fetch me, as the spirits had told her to keep the old will as it was and to become reconciled to me. I didn't believe Sarah, and refused to go. We argued for quite a long time, and it was after ten o'clock when, along with Sarah, I slipped across to the Manor House. Of course, Mrs. Pike was safe in bed, and did not know that I had gone out." Chris stopped for breath.

"Go on! go on!" said the inspector sharply.

"I went into the grounds through the postern gate, which is up the side road."

"I know ; I have seen that gate. Well ? "

"Well, I entered the house after ten o'clock, and went straight to the drawing-room. There I found my aunt dead in her chair."

"According to the medical evidence she was murdered at ten," said Miss Hesmond timidly to Hixon.

He nodded. "I know. Can you swear that you did not enter the Manor House until after ten ? "

"Yes, and so can Sarah Jundy. The servants had gone to bed, and there is no other witness but my aunt's maid."

"Hum ! Go on. Why did you not give the alarm when you saw that Mrs. Baltin was dead ? "

"Sarah Jundy persuaded me not to. She pointed out from the marks on my aunt's throat that she had been murdered. Then she hinted that I might be suspected because my aunt had disinherited me in Pess's favour, and was to make the new will the next day. I suppose I acted like a fool," confessed Chris frankly, "as I should have stood my ground, knowing that I was innocent. But I was panic-struck when Sarah showed me what danger I stood in, and I agreed to her suggestion."

"What was her suggestion ? " asked the inspector quickly.

"That my visit should be kept quiet ; that I should get back to Mrs. Pike's and into bed ; and that, after a decent interval, Sarah should come to me with the news of the murder."

"You did all that ? "

"Yes. I left the Manor House by the postern gate at half-past ten or thereabouts, and it was then that Dolly saw me, I suppose. I went to bed, and long after eleven Sarah knocked me and Mrs. Pike up with

the news. I had to act a part, and I hated doing so ; but as I had committed myself so far I had to go on with the business."

" Foolish, foolish Chris," said Miss Hesmond, shaking her head.

" Yes, I *was* foolish. I should have stood my ground, and have given the alarm at once. However, there you are, Hixon, so you can arrest me or not, as you please."

Hixon stood up with a smile. " No, I shan't arrest you," he said frankly, " although I think you have behaved foolishly. If you were guilty, you would not be such a fool as to confess all this to me."

" I might, you know," said Chris promptly, " seeing what Dolly knows."

" Don't make things out worse against yourself than they are," rejoined the inspector dryly ; " but you are wise to speak out. Now I know everything, and if Dr. Pess or this girl come to me with their statements I shall know how to deal with them."

Miss Hesmond nodded in a satisfied way. " Can you help Chris ? " she asked anxiously.

" I'll try to. At present I don't see my way clear. And one thing, Larcher," added Hixon gravely, " it is my duty, you know, but I must have you watched."

" Oh, that's all right," said Chris, with a flush, for he did not like the idea. " I suppose you must do your duty, only don't have me watched too conspicuously."

" You can depend upon my doing it quietly. I believe you to be innocent, but in the face of what you say I must keep an eye on you. Angry, eh ? "

" No," said Chris, shaking hands. " I'm going to trust you thoroughly."

CHAPTER XVI

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

AT the expiration of twenty-four hours Miss Hesmond quite believed that Pess would communicate with the police regarding Chris. This she told Hixon when giving an account of the doctor's visit, whereupon the inspector immediately saw the necessity of returning to his office. Believing that Larcher was innocent, and wishing to save him from undergoing more trouble than was necessary, he did not desire that the information of Pess should be given to any one but himself. For this reason he cut short his holiday and took up his duties, which included full charge of the Wichley murder case. Therefore, when Pess did arrive with the intention of getting the young squire arrested, his story had to be told to the inspector instead of to an underling. The doctor was extremely disappointed when Hixon said that he knew all about the matter already, but did not intend to proceed until he procured more evidence.

"But Larcher will bolt," protested Pess angrily.

"He won't bolt," Hixon assured the little man serenely; "I am having him watched. And that girl is being watched also, doctor, together with her lover."

"Jem Trap has nothing to do with the matter, inspector," protested Pess again.

"How can you be sure of that? Larcher may be the victim of a conspiracy."

"Why should he be?"

"Well, doctor, you know sufficient of Wichley gossip to be sure that the Banks girl has no great love for

Mr. Larcher. She hoped to make a good marriage, and is disappointed, therefore she desires revenge. I quite believe that she did walk outside the manor wall with her lover on that night and about that hour. But Jem, who had every reason to dislike the old lady, might have committed the crime, and then to save him and punish Mr. Larcher the girl might make up this cock-and-bull story."

"I believe that Dolly is telling the truth," said Pess doggedly.

"I daresay you do," retorted Hixon cynically. "You have no love for Mr. Larcher, who has got what you wanted."

"I did not want it—if you mean the property."

"I do mean the property. No, doctor, you did not want it when Mrs. Baltin made the proposal to disinherit her nephew in your favour; but now that you have lost all your money through the failure of the Tudor Bank you are angry that Mr. Larcher has come off best."

"Who says that I have lost my money?" demanded Pess, angry and impetuous.

Hixon laughed. Chris had given him the information, which had been reported by the family lawyer; but he did not intend to tell Pess that. "Never mind, doctor. It is enough for you to know that I have made inquiries about you as about others."

"I had nothing to do with the death of Mrs. Baltin," said Pess very indignantly.

"No; I don't say for one minute that you had. On the face of it, her death was your misfortune, as by it you lost a lot of money. But you are more or less mixed up in the matter; otherwise you would not be here."

"I am here to tell you that Larcher is guilty, and to demand his arrest."

"Quite so. Therefore it is my duty to make inquiries about you, and learn why you take this step. Mr. Larcher is your friend——"

"He *was* my friend," interrupted the little man sharply, "but since he has murdered a lady to whom I owe much he is my friend no longer. And you can make all inquiries you choose about me, inspector. There is nothing in my past of which I am ashamed."

"I am not saying that there is, doctor. But my inquiries have resulted in my learning why you are hostile to Mr. Larcher. You grudge him the fortune."

"I do not. My sole reason for coming here is to avenge Mrs. Baltin."

Hixon shook his head, laughing. "I think a little personal disappointment is mingled with that reason," he said dryly, "and Mr. Larcher may be innocent after all. I don't say that he is, mind you. Still, we know that this Banks girl hates him, and this accusation may be, and probably is, the result of a conspiracy on her part to condemn Mr. Larcher and save Jem Trap."

"I don't believe it. Larcher was at the Manor House on that night. Both Dolly and Jem Trap can swear to it."

"Well, when I think it necessary for them to swear to it I shall call upon them, doctor. Meanwhile I would remind you that I have full charge of this case, and I forbid you to meddle with my plans."

"I don't want to. What are your plans?"

"That's my business, Dr. Pess. You have made your report, the greater portion of which I was acquainted with before you came, and I am now considering it. When the time comes I shall move. But you can tell that Banks girl and Jem Trap that they must hold their confounded tongues. If they don't they will have to reckon with me. And you can take the same warning to yourself."

Pess was obliged to give in, as Hixon had all the strength of the law behind him. He departed rather downcast, for he had quite made up his mind that Larcher would be arrested. Hixon was quite right in his surmise that the doctor regretted the loss of the fortune and was angry with Chris for getting it. When possessed of money Pess had been quite willing to act in a straight and honest manner, but now that he was poor he was annoyed at his uprightness. Like Lord Clive, he was astonished at his own moderation, and sincerely wished that Mrs. Baltin had made the second will. Then, when in possession of the village and the rents, he would have been able to help Chris—which he assured himself he would have done—and also would have been able to laugh at the failure of the Tudor Bank. But as things were he had not a shilling, while Chris, as the saying goes, was rolling in money. Not only that, but Chris, as Pess truly believed, had deprived him of Mrs. Baltin, who probably would have helped him in his trouble. Therefore it was not to be wondered at that Pess now hated the young man even more than he had formerly liked him.

The doctor went home terribly disappointed with the law's delays, and told Miss Banks what the inspector had said. Dolly was furious, since her revenge on Chris seemed to be farther off than ever; but she was sensible enough to see that it was best to obey Hixon, lest trouble might come of the matter to Jem. And when she related to Jem what Pess had related to her, he was greatly alarmed for his safety. With an oath he protested his innocence both of murder and conspiracy, yet ordered Dolly to hold her tongue and meddle no more with the young squire and his doings. Miss Banks had to do as she was told, for by this time Jem was her master.

Having settled matters so far, Hixon turned his attention to Mr. Michael Felk and his past life. It seemed to the inspector that if he could find out what had become of the goods stolen from Felk's house he might be able to trace the assassin of Mrs. Baltin. That one and the same man had committed both crimes Hixon was tolerably sure, and on this assumption he proceeded. At the same time, thanks to the suspicions of Miss Hesmond which she had communicated to him, the inspector thought that it was just as well to learn who Felk really was, and why he had come down to so quiet a village as Wichley. He knew how Felk had come, as Chris had told him of the friendship existing between the vicar and the stockbroker's father. But what Hixon wanted to know was *why* so smart and dapper and rich a man had chosen so unfashionable a neighbourhood for his sojourn in the country. Armed with the photograph given by Miss Hesmond, the inspector went to London to make inquiries. He did not hope to find anything likely to make Mr. Felk out a very great sinner, nor did he expect to find him involved in the murder case further than the fact that Felk's goods had been stolen on the same night that Mrs. Baltin had lost her life and her diamonds. In fact, Hixon thought that he was going on a wild-goose chase and was wasting his time. But somehow the old maid's positive assurance that Felk was a bad man impressed Hixon, and out of sheer curiosity he desired to learn if she was right or wrong. And yet, although he did not know it, the apparently groundless belief of Miss Hesmond was guiding him along the dark path and towards the light of truth.

For a week Mr. Hixon never appeared in Wichley, and during that time things went on much as usual. Thanks to the inspector's orders, Dolly and Jem and Dr. Pess all held their respective tongues, so the

gossip concerning Chris gradually died more or less away. Certainly there were still some who hinted that he knew more about his aunt's death than he chose to say, but the majority of the villagers laughed at the mere idea. Chris was a good landlord, he was extremely popular, and the new laws and ordinances which he had introduced into his miniature kingdom were extraordinarily beneficial. And as the villagers were getting nothing but good from Larcher, it was not likely that they would hear evil spoken of concerning their benefactor. Those who still suspected Chris of complicity in the crime were looked at askance, and finally hid their diminished heads. So far all was satisfactory.

But Chris did not find his relations with Mr. Dene satisfactory at all. The vicar still desired Alice to marry Felk, for whom he appeared to have developed a deep affection on the basis that he had known his father. Why this should be no one could explain, but the fact remained that Felk persecuted Alice with his attentions, and Mr. Dene urged her all day and every day to marry the prosperous stockbroker. As to Chris, the vicar plainly stated that until he cleared himself of the suspicions rife in the village he was not to have anything to do with Alice. It was in vain that Larcher pointed out how faint those suspicions had grown and how popular he had become. Dene was obstinate and cold in his manner, so Chris had to keep away from the vicarage, where Felk was received with open arms. But Alice frequently met him at Miss Hesmond's, much to the annoyance of her father, and the lovers remained true to one another. The vicar would have stopped all this intercourse, and Felk asked him to do so. But Dene dreaded lest his daughter should take up her abode with Miss Hesmond, and defy him by marrying Chris

without his authority. Therefore he contented himself with protestations and rebukes. As usual Mr. Dene wavered between his inward weakness and outward strength, swinging from one extreme to the other as he grew hot and cold. He did not know his own mind, nor did Felk, who was much annoyed by this silly vacillation.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Miss Hesmond, as has been seen, did not like Felk, nor did she ever seek his society. But one day she received a letter from Hixon, which she read with great care, and the next day sent an invitation to the stockbroker to drink tea with her. Naturally the old lady did not ask Alice or Chris to make up the party, as the presence of Felk would have made things unpleasant. So Felk was requested to come alone, and willingly accepted the invitation. He knew that Miss Hesmond was Alice's greatest friend, and hoped to enlist her on his side by cajoling her into a good humour. But as Miss Hesmond was invariably in a good humour, no cajoling was needed. All the same, Felk was disappointed when he learned why she had asked him to tea. Far from coming on to his side, the old maid pointedly urged him to give up Alice to his rival. The mere suggestion made Felk furious.

"Really, Miss Hesmond, you must take me for a fool," he said, when drinking tea and eating cake. "I don't want to be rude when I am partaking of your hospitality, but you really must take me for a fool."

"I take you for a wise man," said Miss Hesmond sweetly. "You pretend to be a rather frivolous person, Mr. Felk, but I know better. You are clever and shrewd and brilliant."

"I may be all three," said Felk dryly, "and, on the other hand, I may be none of the three; but I

admit that I am shrewd enough to wish to know the reason why you are giving me all this sugar to eat."

"Because I wish to appeal to your shrewdness, Mr. Felk. Here is Alice, who is in love with Mr. Larcher, and who has been in love for many months. Why want to marry a girl whose heart is given to another?"

"Because I love her. I don't see why I shouldn't have as good a chance as that Larcher, whose character is smirched."

"Isn't that a rather spiteful remark?" said Miss Hesmond mildly.

"Very," acknowledged Felk dryly. "It is one quite unworthy of the clever, shrewd, brilliant person you take me to be."

"I am glad you say that," remarked Miss Hesmond, quite equal to the occasion. "It shows that I am right in my reading of your character. But if you love Alice you will not try to prevent her marriage with Mr. Larcher. You would like to see her happy, I am sure."

"With me," said Felk selfishly, "not with Larcher."

"Oh, I think you are kinder-hearted than to mean what you say. And, remember, besides happiness which Mr. Larcher can give Alice, he can give her a position and wealth which you cannot."

"Position? Ha! To be the wife of a heavy country squire. What is that to a beautiful girl like Alice, who would adorn a much higher position?"

"Which you cannot give her," said Miss Hesmond again, and very cleverly.

"How do you know? I am rich."

"But not so rich as Chris," said the old lady eagerly. "Why, the family jewels alone of the Baltins are enough to tempt any girl."

"Alice does not care for jewels," said Felk doggedly, and carefully controlling the expression of his face.

"Then she isn't a woman, Mr. Felk. We women all love jewels and lace and furs and such-like luxuries. And if you only saw the Baltin jewels you would change your mind. Men as well as women would care for them: rubies, sapphires, and diamonds all wonderfully set in exquisite gold-work."

"Have you seen them?" asked Felk, interested. "Or is this a mere story of Larcher's to lure Alice into marriage?"

"I have seen them, and so has Alice. Mrs. Baltin took us both one day up to her bedroom, where the safe is. She showed us treasures like those in Aladdin's cave. Both Alice and I were in raptures. Come, Mr. Felk, surely you don't wish Alice to lose these things and happiness as well?"

"I want her to marry me," said the stockbroker obstinately; "and I may be able to give her jewels quite as rich and rare as those you mention. You don't know my financial position."

"You are right. Neither I nor any one else know a thing about you, Mr. Felk. You descended on Wichley from the clouds."

"The vicar knows all about me, as he knew my father, Miss Hesmond, and that is all that need concern you. As to Larcher, he'd better remove his jewels to the bank, or he may have them stolen. Indeed, I wonder that the person who strangled Mrs. Baltin did not loot the safe you mention as well as steal the diamonds she wore."

"So do I. But evidently the person in question was interrupted before he was able to get up to the bedroom. He had not far to go either," mused Miss Hesmond, "as the bedroom is directly over the drawing-room. Well, Mr. Felk"—she rose with a sigh—"my asking you to visit me has been a failure."

"Don't say that," retorted the stockbroker, with

an ironic look in his pale eyes, "for I have greatly enjoyed your company."

"It's not that," said the old lady, with another sigh, "but you will not give up Alice to Mr. Larcher."

"Certainly I will not. I have no intention of making him happy at my expense."

"But you won't object to Alice having a few days of happiness?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am going to London to-morrow for two days," said the old lady slowly, "and I have Mr. Dene's permission to take Alice with me. Do not try and prevent this, as I know you can by speaking to Mr. Dene."

"And why should I not, when Larcher will probably follow you up to Town in order to have free intercourse with Alice?"

"He *did* say something about going to Town," said Miss Hesmond, hesitating. "In fact, I think he is going up to-morrow, when Alice and I are going."

"I see. It has all been arranged. Well, Miss Hesmond, you can set your mind at rest. I am so sure that Alice is mine that you can take her up to Town, and Larcher can meet her, and you can have high jinks all round. I shan't interfere, as Larcher can make hay while the sun shines. Alice is mine and mine alone, and neither you nor Larcher nor any one else shall keep her from me. I have her father on my side, remember."

Miss Hesmond nodded. "You are hypnotizing the poor man."

"Rubbish!"

"No, it's the truth. I can see your strength in your eyes."

A gleam shot from the pale orbs of the stockbroker. "Then be wise, and do not cross my path

Good-bye, Miss Hesmond. You mean well, but I am too strong for you, and for Larcher also. Persuade him to give up the game. I have made up my mind to win, so there is no more to be said."

Miss Hesmond shrugged her shoulders, and accepted her defeat with as good a grace as she could manage. She had hoped to waken some spark of manhood in Felk, whereby he might have been induced to allow Alice to marry the man she truly loved; but Felk evidently was an extremely selfish and brutal person, and so long as he got his own way did not care on whom he trod. Unless something very unexpected happened Alice might be worried by her father into becoming the man's wife; but Miss Hesmond believed that the unexpected event in question would happen, and decided that if it did not she would get Alice to marry Larcher under the rose. Then Dene and Felk could rage as much as they liked. There would be no breaking of marriage bonds once they were tied.

It was extraordinary that Dene should consent to Alice's trip to London in Miss Hesmond's company seeing how much he disliked her. But this was only another sample of Dene's wavering nature. At first he refused, and then when Alice boldly said that she would go in spite of opposition he gave way. All the same, so as to prevent Alice from seeing her lover, he went himself, and behaved fairly agreeably. Miss Hesmond was rather annoyed by his making an inconvenient third. Still, it could not be helped, and she put up with it as best she could. Chris also came to Town, and boldly joined the party, notwithstanding Mr. Dene's scowls and freezing manner. But Larcher refused to see the coldness of his reception, and Dene had to accept what he could not prevent. Never was there so vacillating and angry a man as the vicar during the stay of the party in Town.

On the morning when Larcher was about to start for this enjoyment Hixon drove up to the manor in a motor-car, and asked Chris to put him up for the night. Larcher was surprised at this request, but, after some conversation, he willingly allowed the inspector to be his guest. He liked Hixon, especially as he felt that he owed him much in not being arrested, and regretted that he had to go to Town.

"I suppose you don't mind my going?" asked Chris, when everything was settled.

"Not at all," said the inspector coolly. "My man will follow you, but will not be intrusive. It is only to satisfy the authorities that I am doing my duty, Larcher, that I have you followed. If anything comes out, and what we know is made public, I want to show a clean sheet."

"I understand," said Chris heartily, "and I really don't mind. But why do you wish to stay here to-night?"

"Well," drawled Hixon meditatively, "I wish to examine Sarah Jundy and the other servants in such a way as will not awaken their suspicions. I must get at the truth of this matter, Larcher, if only to clear your character. If I came officially the servants would answer nothing, but as your guest—you see I'm in mufti—they will be off their guard and will give me hints. Go away, Larcher, and I hope you will enjoy yourself."

"I hope so," said Chris, with a shrug, "but as Mr. Dene is coming also to play dragon I fear that the party will be dull. Good-bye, Hixon. All the house is at your disposal. I'll be back some time to-morrow."

With the greatest friendship on either side the two men parted; and while Chris went to Town, Hixon made himself comfortable at the Manor House. He

had brought over his evening dress kit in a portmanteau, and arrayed himself for dinner with considerable satisfaction. Instructed by Chris, the housekeeper—and that was Sarah Jundy—gave the inspector an excellent dinner, and he enjoyed the same greatly. Hixon, in fact, was delighted to get back to the position to which his birth entitled him, and, although he was a mere police-inspector, he enjoyed every moment of his stay in the grand old house. Save Sarah Jundy, none of the servants knew who he was, and he instructed the housekeeper not to mention his profession. Of course, in the servants' hall there was much gossip and many questions as to the name and quality of the master's guest. But Sarah Jundy, who was clever in her own way, managed to baffle every one. No one, therefore, knew that Inspector Hixon, who had charge of the Balin murder case, was under the roof of the manor.

It so happened that Green, the constable, in pursuance of orders given from headquarters, strolled up to the manor on the pretext that it was necessary to see that all was well. Hixon slipped out of the side door and gave him certain instructions, which sent him back to the village. Then the inspector, having enjoyed his dinner, smoked a cigar, enjoyed a cup of coffee as much as he had done the viands, and played a solitary game of billiards. Towards ten o'clock he intimated to Sarah that he was going to bed, and she showed him into a room next door to the gloomy apartment formerly occupied by the deceased old lady. Then Sarah, who was a great martinet, sent all the servants to bed, and retired herself. By eleven o'clock the lights were out in the Manor House, and every one was tucked away for the night.

But Hixon was awake. Still in his evening dress, which he had not discarded, he sat in his bedroom

waiting and watching. He had extinguished the lamp, and was seated near the window in the darkness, listening to the chimes of the church, which rang out every quarter. The night was very gloomy and starless and moonless, so Hixon could see nothing of the view. The church clock clanged out eleven; then came the chimes for the quarters and again the clang of the midnight bell. Hixon still sat waiting and listening, until, shortly after twelve o'clock, he heard stealthy footsteps ascending the stairs. At once the inspector produced a revolver, with which he was already provided, and stole to the door of his bedroom. He saw a light coming up the stairs—the light of a dark lantern, which was occasionally shut off by the person who carried it. As truly as if he had been in the confidence of this person, Hixon knew that the burglar had entered by the drawing-room casement and was seeking Mrs. Baltin's former bedroom. If he could capture this person, he made sure that he would have the old lady's assassin under arrest.

The man who arrived at the top of the stairs threw the light of the lantern right and left. He even held it to his face to see that it was all right; but of his face Hixon could see nothing, as the same was covered with a black mask. The man looked everywhere carefully, and then entered a room. Finding from the absence of a bed that it was not the room he sought, he tried Hixon's door; but the inspector behind had already closed it softly, and the burglar did not think it worth while to try further. He took out a plan, which he examined by lantern light, and then made unhesitatingly for Mrs. Baltin's bedroom. Hixon waited for a quarter of an hour, and finally stole out silently without shoes to spy out the land. He heard the grinding of a centre-bit, and saw, on looking through the door, that the man had the light

on the safe. In a wonderfully short time he broke into it, and pulled out money and jewels in great quantities. Hixon lost no time. He ran in and he'd a pistol to the burglar's head, commanding surrender. At the same time he blew a police whistle which he held ready between his teeth. The man sprang up, and, notwithstanding the menace of the pistol, fought silently and furiously. One shot after another rang out, awakening the startled servants, and then from below came the shouts of the police, led on by Constable Green. By the time they entered the house, through the front door, opened by Sarah Jundy, Hixon had his man down and handcuffed. Then he tore off the mask.

"Mr. Michael Felk!" said Hixon. "Ah! I thought as much."

CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER SENSATION

"It is incredible! It is impossible!" cried the Rev. John Dene wildly. "You are drawing upon your imagination. I cannot believe it."

Inspector Hixon smiled. He had just called at the vicarage to inform Mr. Dene of his success with regard to the capture of Felk. Dene had brought his daughter home that same morning, and Miss Hesmond had accompanied them. Chris, because of the parson's hostility, had been compelled to return alone, and had arrived at the Manor House in the afternoon to hear from the exulting Sarah Jundy what had occurred on the previous night. He immediately wished to see Mr. Dene and inform him what a scoundrel his dear friend Felk was, but the old housekeeper insisted that he should allow Hixon to pay the visit. It was the inspector's desire that this arrangement should be made, and he had left instructions accordingly with Sarah. Knowing that he owed much to Hixon, the squire reluctantly agreed to stay away from the vicarage. But since he could not see Alice and her father, so as to learn how he stood now that Felk was exposed as a blackguard, he went off to talk the matter over with Miss Hesmond. Meanwhile Hixon presented himself at five o'clock in the vicar's study, and explained all that had taken place.

Dene was staggered by the recital. His severe face expressed the utmost astonishment, while his obstinate mouth relaxed, and his black eyes filled with wonder. He could not bring himself to believe that Hixon was

speaking the truth, and therefore told him that he was drawing on his imagination. The inspector laughed indulgently.

"It is natural that you should say that, sir," he remarked. "What I say *does* seem to be impossible; but you must remember that truth is stranger than fiction. What I have related is true."

"But it can't be! it can't be!" Dene rubbed his scanty locks into a kind of crest, and with his narrow face and beaky nose looked something like an angry cockatoo. "Why, I knew his father. He was a good man."

"The virtues of the father have evidently not descended to the son," retorted Hixon dryly. "Felk is a clever London thief, a swell mobsman, a scientific criminal of the up-to-date type. Your daughter has had a narrow escape, sir."

"My daughter?"

"Yes. I understand from my friend Larcher that you wished your daughter to marry this scamp."

"I did! I did! But then, I never knew he was a scamp. He seemed all right."

"Ah!" said Hixon significantly, "you should never judge by appearance, no more than you should go by gossip. Therefore, if I were you, Mr. Dene, I should certainly allow your daughter to marry Larcher."

"But the rumours in the village about——"

"I observed that you should never go by gossip," interrupted the officer in an emphatic voice. "Larcher has been greatly maligned by that girl Banks."

"He was in love with her," exclaimed Dene hurriedly.

"He was not. I know the whole story both from Larcher and from Miss Hesmond."

"Well, well, well!" The vicar rubbed his head again, and looked more like a cockatoo than ever.

"It seems that Felk who appeared to be good is wicked, and that Mr. Larcher who was supposed to be wicked is good."

"Yes," said Hixon still more dryly, "I think that is a very reasonable explanation."

"Dear, dear, dear!" The parson threw himself into his chair and faced his visitor with his hands on his knees. "Tell me all about it."

"But your daughter and Larcher?" said the inspector, who was as obstinate as the vicar himself, and much more sensible.

"I shall send for Larcher to-night, and we shall have a talk. If matters can be adjusted to my liking, I don't say but what I may not agree to the marriage. But I should like to know, Mr. Hixon, why you take such an interest in this very private matter."

"Larcher is my friend, and I take an interest in all that concerns him. He has been very badly treated by you and by others, so I wish to see things put right for him. Do you understand?"

Mr. Dene nodded in a rather subdued way, as he was beginning to see that he had acted somewhat hastily. "Leave things in my hands, Mr. Hixon. Full justice shall be done to Mr. Larcher. I am not unjust, I trust."

Hixon shrugged his shoulders. He thought that the parson was unjust and narrow and prejudiced and bigoted; but he did not say so. Mr. Dene evidently was willing to receive Chris and arrange matters, so the inspector was content to say nothing more. Instead of replying to Dene's last speech he deftly changed the subject. "You wish to hear how I caught Felk, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes! Dear me! How very dreadful it all is, and how incredible! Begin at the beginning, my dear sir, and go right on to the end."

"I generally do adopt that plan," said Hixon, with a laugh. "Well, then, Mr. Dene, I have been searching into this murder case, as you may have heard."

"Yes, yes! I know, I know! Pray continue."

"I was not satisfied with the verdict of the jury at the inquest," the officer went on to say, "so I came over here to stay at the Red Horse and look about me. I heard the rumours spread abroad by that girl Banks which implicated Larcher in the business. As I had met Larcher during the trouble, and found him to be a very good fellow, I could not bring myself to believe that these rumours were true. I called on Miss Hesmond, who happens to be a friend of my mother's, and stumbled across an explanation."

"She is a great friend of Mr. Larcher's, I know," said the vicar, nodding.

"Quite so. She is the best friend he has, and sticks up for him on all and every occasion. She did so when I called, and brought us together. Larcher explained his doings on the night of the murder."

"What doings?"

"Those that the Banks girl saw something of, and built up her story on according to what she saw."

"I don't understand."

"I shall explain, but you must keep what I say to yourself," said Hixon; and when the vicar gave his promise he related all that Dolly had said to Pess, and stated how the story had reached Miss Hesmond. "So you see, Mr. Dene, that as Larcher did not enter the Manor House until after ten, and as his aunt was strangled before ten, he cannot be guilty."

"Can he prove that he did not enter the Manor House until after ten?"

"Yes. Sarah Jundy was with him, and I have examined her. I am quite satisfied that she and Larcher are speaking the truth."

"It is terrible, terrible! All the same, I am delighted to learn that Mr. Larcher is innocent."

"Knowing what a good fellow he is, I wonder you ever brought yourself to believe that he was guilty," said Hixon somewhat indignantly.

"I never believed that. But the rumours, you know?"

"Those have been explained. Are you satisfied now?"

"Quite, quite! Dear me! what a wicked girl that Dolly Banks is! A few words of admonition——"

"No," said Hixon sharply. "Remember I have your promise to be silent. There is much to be worked out in connection with this case, and if you speak you may complicate matters. Hold your tongue."

"Certainly, certainly! But all you have told me has little or nothing to do with Felk. How came you to suspect him?"

"I did not suspect him at all," declared the officer frankly, "but Miss Hesmond aroused my suspicions."

"She had no grounds for thinking that anything was wrong about Felk save that she objected to his marrying Alice."

"I agree with you there. But between you and me, Mr. Dene, Miss Hesmond is a very, very clever woman, and she seems to know queer things connected with the unseen world."

"Nonsense! Nonsense!"

"Well, it may be nonsense, or it may be uncommon sense," retorted the inspector. "What it is I can't say. But she seems to have some sixth sense, which enables her to see more than the ordinary person does. I don't understand her, as all such uncanny matters are beyond my comprehension. All I know is that she suspected Felk to be other than he represented himself to be, and suggested that I should look into his past life. Also she gave me the photograph which

Felk gave to Miss Dene. I suppose Miss Dene gave it to her."

"I suppose so," said the vicar mechanically. "Well?"

"I went to London, and in ways which I need not explain I found out that the man was a thief and a scoundrel. For years he evaded the authorities, but was detected in a minor crime some time ago. His portrait was in the Scotland Yard gallery of rogues, and by comparing it with the photograph which Miss Hesmond gave me I knew that I had caught my man. I shan't tell you Mr. Felk's record, Mr. Dene, as you would be shocked. It is sufficient to say that he is an expert criminal born and bred, and we are very glad to have him under lock and key."

"Oh dear me!" sighed Mr. Dene. "And I knew his father! Why did he take to these wicked ways?"

"He is a *born* criminal, I tell you," said Hixon, "and, moreover, found that he could make money easier by dishonesty than by honesty. Anyhow, he and a man called Walters, who is his accomplice and acts as his servant, have been looting the public for years. He got into trouble some time ago, as I told you, and it was necessary for him to lie low for a time. He met you, and owing to your having known his father he was able to establish himself here. In London he and Walters have half a dozen names, and on the Continent half a dozen more; but in Wichley both the men used their true names, and lived, on the whole, very decently. Occasionally, however, they went away to commit crimes."

"Ah!" said the vicar, greatly enlightened, "so that is why Felk was absent so often?"

"Yes. Well, to make a long story short, when I learned the past of our friend I immediately guessed that he had something to do with the loss of Mrs. Baltin's diamonds and with her death."

"His own house was robbed, remember."

"That was a red herring which he drew across his own trail," said Hixon, with a meaning smile. "Felk's house was not robbed, although he and Walters gave it every appearance of its being robbed. They concealed the articles which were said to be stolen, and then set afloat the story of the burglary to avert suspicions from themselves."

"I see, I see! How wicked and how ingenious! Yes, yes?"

"I thought that it would be best to catch Felk red-handed," continued the officer. "I therefore wrote to Miss Hesmond, and asked her to invite Felk to tea so that she might tell him all about the jewels in Mrs. Baltin's room. She did as I requested, and Felk swallowed the bait. Then I induced Larcher to go to Town after Miss Hesmond and his——"

"Was that all arranged?" asked the vicar indignantly, for he remembered that he had been inveigled to London also.

"I'm telling you that it was all arranged. You and Miss Hesmond and Miss Dene and Larcher were all got out of the way so as to give Felk a chance of falling into my trap. I stayed, with Larcher's permission, at the Manor House, and, as I guessed, Felk came after the jewels. I captured him just as he managed to break open the safe. Green was outside waiting my signal whistle with several policemen. They captured Walters, who was watching at the drawing-room casement, through which his accomplice and master had entered the house."

"Great heavens!" cried Mr. Dene, starting to his feet. "That was the same casement through which I spoke to Mrs. Baltin. I remember now how carefully Felk examined it."

"Of course," assented Hixon, with a nod. "He

intended to enter and get those jewels which Mrs. Baltin wore, although he knew nothing about the safe until Miss Hesmond told him at my request. It was Felk who stole the diamonds on the night of the murder."

"And he murdered Mrs. Baltin," said Dene with horror, for the mere idea that he had entertained a criminal made him shiver.

Hixon's face fell. "I can't be sure of that," he said doubtfully. "Felk and his man are both in prison, and, as I caught them red-handed, they are bound to be sentenced. Therefore Felk, finding that there was no escape, made a clean breast of it to me. Or, rather, I should say he made what *he* called a clean breast."

"What is the distinction?"

"This. Felk says that he robbed Mrs. Baltin of the diamonds, but that he did not kill her."

"Who did, then?"

"He swears that he does not know. It seems that he thought Bank Holiday night would be a good time to break into the Manor House, as so many scoundrels from London were about that they might well be suspected."

"Why, he said something about that to me."

"Of course. He laid his plans excellently to avert suspicion from himself, and would have succeeded but that Miss Hesmond induced me to look up his past, Mr. Dene. At any rate, Felk says that he and Walters came to the casement, and found it open."

"That was admitted at the inquest?" interpolated the vicar quickly.

"Yes. Dr. Pess opened it at Mrs. Baltin's request. Anyhow, shortly after ten Felk clambered through the casement, found Mrs. Baltin dead in her chair and stole the diamonds from her body. He and

Walters would have gone over the house but that they heard a noise. That, I take it, was Larcher and Sarah Jundy coming in by the postern and at the back of the house. Felk and his man decamped at once, returned home, and then arranged their own little burglary."

Mr. Dene reflected for a few moments. "I don't quite understand how they could have escaped so quickly and yet not have seen the murder. Mrs. Baltin was certainly killed at ten o'clock according to the medical evidence."

"Quite so. But Dr. Swift could not be certain as to the exact time. She was strangled somewhere before ten or at ten o'clock."

"What does Sarah Jundy say? She went for Larcher, you know."

Hixon nodded. "Dr. Pess and Mrs. Baltin held a séance, and he left at nine o'clock, shown out by Sarah Jundy. Mrs. Baltin remained in the drawing-room to write letters. At half-past nine she called in Sarah, and told her that the spirits had instructed her to be reconciled with her nephew, and that she intended to let the old will stand. Sarah, by her order, went to call Larcher from Mrs. Pike's house, and it was a quarter to ten when Sarah left the drawing-room on that errand. Owing to Larcher being unwilling to come, he and Sarah did not get into the Manor House until a quarter-past ten. During that half-hour Mrs. Baltin was murdered."

"By Felk?"

"I really can't say, since he denies it; but my own impression is that he did murder her when she tried to give the alarm on seeing him scramble through the casement. There was plenty of time for him to do so during the half-hour which elapsed between Sarah Jundy's departure and her return with Larcher. But if we give Felk the benefit of the doubt, some other

person also had time to kill the woman and decamp before Felk arrived on the scene. It was a close shave, I admit. All the same, it could be done."

"And what do you believe?"

"I believe that Felk is a liar, and is trying to save his neck. I told you that I could not be sure, Mr. Dene, and I admit that there is a doubt in my mind, although I accuse him so boldly. His story may be true, and it may be a false one; but you can be certain of one thing, and that is Larcher is not guilty. Sarah Jundy can prove that, and if what Felk says is true he can prove it also."

"How?"

"Can't you see," said Hixon, slightly exasperated by the vicar's density, "if Felk found Mrs. Baltin dead before Larcher came to the Manor House with Sarah, Larcher must necessarily be innocent?"

"I see that; but what I don't see is that if Felk and his man were on the watch for an opportunity to enter the house, it is difficult to understand how they missed the assassin."

"Felk declares, and Walters also, that they did not approach the house until after ten o'clock, and meanwhile were concealed in the bushes under the park trees a great distance away. They did not wish to approach the house until they saw that the lights were extinguished, and, as you know, the lights in the drawing-room were burning. Growing tired of inaction, they decided to venture near the casement, and then saw that Mrs. Baltin was dead. Feeling safe, they entered—at least, Felk did—and robbed her body. Then they decamped when Larcher and Mrs. Jundy were heard approaching from the back."

"Felk must be guilty," said the vicar, with a horrified look.

"Yes, I think he must be," said Hixon, after a

pause. "I do not see how he is going to make his story good."

"Walters, of course, supports Felk?"

"Of course. He is in the same boat as an accomplice. Felk's neck and Walters' neck are both in danger. Certainly for the second burglary I can get them sentenced, as they were caught red-handed. I can nab them for the first also, as the gold in which Mrs. Baltin's diamonds were set has been found in their house. They unset the diamonds, you understand, and sold them separately. Felk was too clever a thief to go to a pawnbroker or a fence to dispose of his plunder. He did so privately. How, I have not been able to find out; but I may do so at the trial."

"It's all dreadfully wicked," lamented Mr. Dene, smoothing his disordered hair. "Why did you come and tell me about it?"

"Can you ask?" said the inspector, as he rose to go, and looking slightly astonished. "You introduced Felk into this parish, since you were the friend of his father. Also you wished him to marry your daughter. I came to explain because it was right that you should know what a blackguard the man is and because I am Larcher's friend. Now that you know Felk's true character, and can see how you have misjudged Larcher, I presume you will make what amends you can. Ask me to the wedding, sir."

"I have not yet considered the possibility of a wedding," said Mr. Dene in an austere way, and unwilling to yield too readily. "However, you can ask Mr. Larcher, if you see him, to come here after dinner."

The inspector nodded, and went away fully satisfied that he had done Chris a good turn in thus straightening out for him the crooked path to the vicar's favour. He duly gave the message, and departed for his office, where there was much to do in connection with the

trial of Felk and his accomplice. The two men were safe in gaol, both feeling despondent at their prospects. Walters, the more timid rogue of the two, was in terror lest he should be hanged as having helped to murder Mrs. Baltin, although he swore that he was innocent. But Felk, with his mincing ways and effeminate looks, was sullenly bold, and as sullenly enraged with Hixon for having got the better of him. Felk denied the murder, although he admitted the burglary, which he could scarcely help doing, seeing that he had been caught red-handed. However, he made up his mind that he would not be hanged for a crime which he swore that he had not committed ; but how he proposed to extricate himself from this terrible dilemma when circumstantial evidence was so strong against him it is hard to say. At all events, bad as was his plight, he still kept up his spirits as best he could, and still defied Hixon to prove him guilty of the greater crime. The little man was brave in his own wicked, unscrupulous way.

After an exhaustive talk with Miss Hesmond, Chris went to the vicarage after dinner, and was received by Mr. Dene with alarming civility. The parson had been turning matters over in his mind since the inspector's departure, and saw very plainly that he had made an ass of himself. The sole way in which he could get back his character as a wise man was to consent immediately to the marriage of Chris and his daughter. He explained this to the squire before Alice came on the scene.

"We all make mistakes at times," admitted Mr. Dene calmly, "and I must say that my estimate of Felk's character has been a wrong one. Also I have misjudged you, Christopher."

"Oh, pray say no more," cried Larcher, distressed by this unusual apology.

"No," said the vicar sternly; "for what I have done I must make amends. Felk took me in, and I believed him to be as good a man as his father was. Now I find he is a burglar and a murderer, and I congratulate myself on the escape that Alice has had. There is a Providence after all."

"Surely you never doubted that?" murmured Chris.

"Of course not. I merely state my belief that there is a Providence after all. That is very clear. And Providence has so guided matters that Alice has been saved from a marriage which would have made me unhappy."

"You mean which would have made *her* unhappy," said Larcher, rather disgusted by the egotism of the speaker.

"No," said Dene obtusely, "which would have made *me* unhappy, as I have a very sensitive nature. However, my pride is humbled, and I admit that I have done wrong. You shall marry Alice, Christopher."

"Thank you. Can I see her at once?"

"You shall see her when I have fully explained myself, Christopher."

"There is nothing more to say," said Chris, who was writhing all the time of this truly uncomfortable interview.

"Pardon me, there is. I objected to you, first, because I believed you to be still wild and profligate. I was wrong, as you have improved into a good young man under the tuition of Miss Hesmond, to whom I hereby make my acknowledgments. Secondly, I objected to you as the nephew of a woman who tampered with unholy things. I was wrong, as her fault was not your fault. Thirdly, I believed you to be implicated in the murder owing to the reckless statements of Dorothy Banks, who is a wicked girl. In

many ways, Christopher, I see that I have acted wrongly towards you. Mr. Hixon has explained matters, and I now give you my hand and my daughter."

"Oh, thank you!" Chris grasped the extended hand, and then looked round for the daughter. "Can I see Alice?"

"You shall see her with my blessing," said the vicar solemnly, and left the room in his stiff way.

Shortly Alice made her appearance, and was immediately locked in her lover's arms. "Oh, Chris, Chris, I can't believe that it is true," she cried, kissing him in the fullness of her joy.

"Oh, it's true enough, darling. All we have to do is to get married as soon as possible, lest your father should change his mind."

"I don't think there is the slightest chance of his doing that, Chris. He has had a lesson. Oh, how dreadful to think that Mr. Felk should be such a villain! And he looked harmless enough, I am sure."

"Don't let us talk of Felk," said Chris, with a shiver, "only of ourselves."

"And of father, who is really behaving very kindly."

"Alice, my dear, I really don't pretend to understand your father. He has given me a most uncomfortable quarter of an hour, as he went through the Valley of Humiliation and took me with him. All the same, he is pleased with himself, and seems to find great pleasure in abasing himself. He's a riddle."

"Then don't let us try to solve him, Chris. I love father in spite of his few faults; but, of course, I love you ever so much more."

"Bless you for the dearest girl in the world," said Chris, and kissed her.

CHAPTER XVIII

MOTHER CORN

NATURALLY there was a great stir in the village when the truth became known concerning Felk and his accomplice. That two expert London thieves should have made Wichley their headquarters, and escaped recognition for so long a period, amazed every one. At the outset Dene was blamed for having introduced Felk into the parish, but when the facts of the matter were made public property it was realized that the vicar had been as honestly deceived as every one else had been. Chris, for the protection of his future father-in-law, took every opportunity of explaining things, and Miss Hesmond also proved to be a tower of strength in defending the parson's honour. The mountain of suspicion against Mr. Dene, therefore, dwindled to a mole-hill, and in time that disappeared altogether. Felk, it was admitted, had deceived the vicar as he had deceived every one else. And Dene was so grateful both to Chris and to Miss Hesmond for the way in which they defended him that he was ashamed of his former shabby behaviour towards them. In this way out of evil came good.

In due time the two scoundrels were committed for trial, and pending the same were transferred to Newgate Prison. For the first burglary they had no defence, as the settings of Mrs. Baltin's jewels were found in their house ; nor could they deny the second burglary, since Hixon had caught them red-handed. But both men steadily denied having committed the murder, holding obstinately to their story that the old lady

was already dead when they entered the drawing-room. Of course, they were not believed for one moment, as every one said that it was natural they should do their best to save themselves from being hanged. Circumstantial evidence was strong against them, and public opinion was still stronger. Even Hixon overcame his first doubts, and looked upon the two as assassins. Whether the crime had been committed by Felk or by his accomplice it was impossible to say; but every one felt certain that either the one or the other was guilty. It was believed that before the trial, or during the trial, or after the trial, the men would confess.

However, one great good resulted from the capture of Felk and Walters. The general public so fully believed in their guilt that Chris was entirely exonerated from all complicity in the death of his aunt. Those who had scoffed at Dolly's wicked gossip were triumphant, and those who had believed the same were ashamed. Larcher became more popular than ever, and was congratulated on all sides. It was this universal congratulation which proved to him how many persons had directly or indirectly credited him with the crime, and Chris was rather annoyed than complimented by the rehabilitation of his character. He said as much to Miss Hesmond.

"I don't know why every one was so certain that I was guilty," he remarked with some irritation. "I am sure there is nothing in my nature to suggest that I would kill a harmless old woman so brutally."

"People always believe the worst of their fellow creatures," said the spinster sententiously. "It's human nature to do so. Mrs. Baltin was harmless enough to them in their opinion, but not harmless so far as you were concerned, Chris. It was known that she intended to disinherit you, therefore there

was, as every one believed, strong reasons why you should wish for her death."

"I would rather have lost the property than that my aunt should have met with so dreadful a death."

"Quite so. I know that, and Alice knows that, and all your staunch friends know that; but the general public cannot conceive that a man should submit tamely to losing his all. People don't know your character, Chris; and if it was explained to them, they would not credit you with having such a character."

"Then they must judge me by themselves."

"I daresay. There are plenty of people who would rob and murder and tyrannize without thinking these things wrong if it were not for the strong arm of the law. They are like the serpent in the bamboo, which was straight only so long as it remained in the bamboo. It's a Chinese fable."

"I can scarcely believe that," said Larcher, after a pause. "People *must* know that theft and murder are wrong."

"Many do, but also many don't. Born criminals, of whom Felk was one, honestly do not see why they should be poor and other people rich. They really are savages coming into contact for the first time with law and order."

"Ah! now you are coming to your reincarnation theory," said the squire good-humouredly, "and that sort of talk is too learned for me. All I can say is that, although I am glad the murderer of my aunt has been discovered, I am annoyed to find that the villagers, to whom I have been kind, should so readily credit me with the commital of an atrocious crime."

"Well, what is done is done," said Miss Hesmond soothingly. "Felk will be punished, and his accomplice also, so think no more about the matter. After all,

you have the estate, you have Alice, you have popularity, so everything has come out right, as I knew it would. Yet——” Miss Hesmond hesitated.

“ Yet what ? ”

“ I told you,” she remarked irrelevantly, “ that you and Alice had to endure trouble before you came together.”

“ Yes ; and what you said has proved true enough. I’m sure we have had heaps of trouble, but it’s all over now.”

“ That is exactly what I am not sure of. There is yet more trouble to be gone through, although it will not be so great as that through which you have already passed.”

“ I don’t see what other trouble can come,” expostulated Chris. “ Felk is the guilty man sure enough.”

“ Are you certain ? ”

“ Aren’t you ? ” asked the young man, greatly surprised.

“ No,” replied Miss Hesmond uneasily. “ I have been instrumental in exposing Felk and his man. I was led to do so in a way which you would not understand.”

“ Some of your magic,” said Chris thoughtfully. “ Well, to tell you the truth, Miss Hesmond, both Hixon and I are beginning to think that there must be some truth in your commerce with the Unseen.”

“ Well,” remarked the old maid serenely, “ you have had proof of the truth. But that I was told to incite Mr. Hixon to search into Felk’s past his true character would never have become known. Well, then, Chris, the same authority who used me as an instrument to bring these things to pass tells me that there is yet more trouble to come.”

“ From what quarter ? ”

"I cannot say; but Dr. Pess, I fancy, has something to do with the matter, and it may be Dolly Banks."

"They both hate me like poison," said the squire, with a shrug, "but what does it matter now? Dolly can talk as she pleases, and Pess can threaten, but the discovery of the truth has drawn their teeth. They can bark, but they cannot bite. I am quite safe, and all I have to do is to get Mr. Dene to consent to my marriage with Alice."

"He has done so, has he not?"

"Yes. But I mean that I must get him to appoint the day. When Alice is my wife we are going for a trip round Europe for six months or a year. When we return all these disagreeable things will be at an end."

"They are not at an end yet, nor are you married yet," insisted Miss Hesmond, "so don't be surprised if more trouble—not much, of course—comes. As to Felk, black as things are against him, I have my doubts as to his guilt. He is a burglar beyond all doubt, but I am not sure that he is a murderer."

"Well, time will show," replied Chris, with a shrug, and left the old maid to pay his daily visit to the vicarage. There Alice and he talked about themselves and their future rather than about the miseries of other people, which was a trifle selfish. But then, love is usually egotistical, and lovers honestly believe that they are the only inhabitants of the world.

Both Pess and Dolly were furious when they found that the man they hated was free from their malice. The girl was rebuked and laughed at for telling what people called her cock-and-bull story, while the doctor received nothing but scowls and oaths from women and men for his having gone to lay an information against the popular squire. Even Jem Trap turned

on Dolly, and told her that if he found her plotting further against Chris he would thrash her first and then leave her. Pess was also warned by Jem to hold his tongue, for Mother Corn's grandson had cherished a profound regard for Chris ever since the young man had stood up to him and had gained the victory. So good a sportsman, as Jem thought, could not and would not commit a crime, and now that his character was proved to be spotless in this respect Trap warned both the conspirators to behave themselves. And for a time they did.

But in the end Dolly's temper got the better of her. It was known that Chris was engaged to Miss Dene with the sanction of her father, and that the marriage would shortly take place. Congratulations on this happy union were heard on every hand, together with praises of Larcher and compliments to Alice. Day after day Miss Banks was obliged to hear her rival admired and Chris spoken highly of. She knew that wealth and happiness were before the young couple—knew also that all her machinations had failed. For a considerable time she bore this punishment fairly well, although her temper was frightful on all and every occasion. But in the end she could endure the general happiness no longer, and went to see Dr. Pess.

Pess had changed considerably from the rotund, cheery little man who had been the friend and adviser of Mrs. Baltin. He had grown so thin that his clothes hung in bags on his body, and his expression was now as dark as previously it had been bright. His state was certainly a sad one. He had lost all his savings in the failure of the Tudor Bank; he had lost his best friend when Mrs. Baltin died; and through his accusation of Chris he had lost his popularity in the village and in the surrounding neighbourhood. Also his practice was dwindling week by week, as former patients

resented his gloomy demeanour, and looked askance at his sullied reputation. Sitting with bowed head in his consulting-room, the man was ripe for any mischief when the mischief-maker called to see him. At the same time he blamed her for having brought him to this pass, and told her so roundly.

"If I hadn't listened to your lies," he said furiously, "I should not have gone to see Hixon and have got myself into all this trouble."

"I didn't tell lies," insisted Dolly angrily. "I *did* see Chris, and so did Jem. It is not denied that he went to the Manor House on that night."

"No; but it has been proved by the evidence of Sarah Jundy that Chris went to the Manor House after ten o'clock, when his aunt was already dead."

"Ah! I daresay," said Dolly viciously; "and I daresay also as you think that Felk murdered her."

Pess looked up in surprise. "That is certain," he said positively; "no one believes otherwise."

"I do," replied Miss Banks promptly; "and as I can't hurt Chris in one way I intend to hurt him in another. You can help me."

"I'll have nothing to do with you," said Pess moodily; "you have done enough harm as it is."

"It's not my fault, doctor. And in any case you can't be worse off than you are, so the only pleasure you can get is to punish Chris. It is he who has brought you to this pass. I hate him, and you hate him. Let us ruin him."

"We can't."

"Yes, we can. Listen! Sarah Jundy murdered her mistress!"

Pess jumped up. "Rubbish! Why should she do that?"

"She had two reasons. The first one is that Mrs.

Baltin discharged her, as Miss Hesmond can prove. The second one is that Sarah is crazy about Chris, and did not want him to lose his property. I believe that he and she made up a plot between them. After you went at nine o'clock at night Sarah strangled Mrs. Baltin, and then went to call Chris to show him the corpse."

"Rubbish!" said Pess again. "Why should Sarah Jundy bring Chris twice to the Manor House?"

"It was all part of the plot," insisted Dolly, who cared very little for reason so long as she could spread scandalous reports. "Sarah Jundy looks small and weak, but she is wiry and tough. She could easily strangle an old woman, and I believe she did. She brought Chris after ten o'clock to see the body, and then it was that I saw him. Afterwards the two thought it would be safer if Chris went back to Mrs. Pike's and Sarah knocked him up after eleven. No wonder that Felk man found Mrs. Baltin dead. Sarah had strangled her."

"There might be something in what you say," pondered Pess, who was as anxious to find something detrimental to Larcher as Miss Banks was; "but how can we get people to see as we see?"

"Oh, a word here and there will do anything," said the experienced mischief-maker briskly. "You can tell your patients, and I can talk in the shop. We needn't say much; a look is often as good as a nod. Nothing may come of the matter, as that Felk may be guilty after all, although I don't think he is. All the same, scandal about Sarah Jundy will hurt Chris, and may tumble him down from his pedestal as her accomplice."

"Well, I'll do my best to make trouble," said Pess revengefully. "After all, I have lost everything, and, as you say, I can't be worse off. I'll get away from

here shortly, as my practice is down to nothing ; but before I go I should like to leave Chris in a hole. Damn him ! ”

Even Dolly, much as she hated the squire, was not prepared for this burst of hatred. “ You used to like Chris,” she said, after a pause.

“ So I did, because I thought he was a good fellow ; but, although he knows that I am hard up and have lost my best friend in his aunt, he has never offered to help me or to lend me a shilling. If Hixon is to be believed, Chris did not murder his aunt, as Felk is guilty ; but if I could only bring home the crime to him through Sarah Jundy, as you suggest, I should die happy. I’ll do it ! ” Pess rose and thumped his desk. “ I’ll do it ! ”

And do it he did ; so did Dolly. By looks and nods and smiles and cautious words the two conspirators sowed dissension in the village of a kind similar to the first. People, of course, laughed to scorn the idea that Sarah Jundy had anything to do with the matter, especially as it seemed certain that Felk was guilty. But little by little it became known that she had something to do with the matter. She had been discharged, and she loved Chris. Therefore it was reasonable to suppose that if she could prevent the signing of the second will by fair means or foul, she would do so. Of course, if the matter had been sifted, it would have been found that there was absolutely no grounds for such a belief ; but, as usual, people did not trouble to sift evidence. In a week Sarah’s character was tolerably black, and there were renewed whispers against the squire. Dolly and Pess kept in the background, and rubbed their hands joyfully over the success of their scandal-mongering.

As usual, the person most interested in these

rumours was the last to hear of the matter, and Sarah, enjoying her new dignity as housekeeper at the manor, knew nothing of all this. She was finally enlightened by Mother Corn, who came especially to tell her what was being said. The old woman liked Sarah, who was her good friend, and often gave her scraps from the kitchen. Besides, she liked Chris also, and wished to see him happy. Finally, Mother Corn had never approved of her grandson's engagement to Miss Banks, as she was shrewd enough to see how malignant was the girl's nature. So to the Manor House came Mother Corn, rocking from side to side in her gait, after her usual custom, in the blue velvet gown, with the linen sun-bonnet and the flamboyant tartan shawl. She was as straight as ever; her face was as brown and her black eyes as piercing. Sarah, who had an uneasy fear of the old witch because of her reported skill in spells, received her in the housekeeper's room, and set out tea. Of this Mother Corn graciously partook, and then proceeded to talk.

"Well, deary," she croaked, while fixing her bright eyes on the other woman, who was nearly as old and quite as withered as herself, "Master Chris is all he should be in the way of happiness and prosperity?"

"Yes, he is, Mother Corn," said Sarah stoutly. "He has his rights, and he is to marry Miss Alice, and his health is good, bless him. And who should hev prosperity and happiness sooner nor Master Chris, who is the finest and kindest and best deary boy in the world?"

"He's all that, lovey. And thinking so, it ain't no wonder as you helped him to all he's got."

"I didn't help him," exclaimed Sarah, sitting up alertly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, my sweety, they do say in the village as you murdered Mrs. Baltin, and then made things right with Master Chris, seeing as you did it to save yourself from being discharged and him from poverty."

Sarah jumped up with an activity surprising in so old a woman, and screamed aloud, with sparkling eyes, "They say? Who say?"

"All say," responded Mother Corn tersely.

"It's lies, lies, lies! Oh, I'll hev the law of them if I hev to bring the whole of this wicked village into court. How dare any one speak such dreadful things? The Lord forgive them!"

"That last is Christian, at any rate," said Mother Corn, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Christian? I hev it in me to *murder* and torture them taking away my character, which is rubies and fine gold to me. Decent I always hev been, and decent I'll always be until Master Chris takes me to the churchyard. And you, ma'am, you, how can you hev the heart to come and tell me this when I've treated you kindly?"

"I'm your friend, deary, that's why," said the old witch dryly. "Better you should learn what's being said from me than from others as ain't got your interests at heart. I'm here to help you and help myself."

"You can help yourself," cried Mrs. Jundy, sitting down, and beginning to rock to and fro and weep copiously, "but help me—you can't, you can't!"

"Yes, I can. I know what I know. See here, deary, don't cry, for crying never did any good save with some silly man as a woman wants to manage. I want to help myself," went on Mother Corn, nodding vehemently, "as I don't like her, and don't want Jem to marry her. And I want to help you

because 'tis only fair as her tongue of a toad should be plucked out."

"And who are you talking of?"

"Of that Dolly Banks."

"She?" cried Mrs. Jundy vigorously. "I thought I'd settled her when she dared to say a word against Master Chris in her very own shop."

"You'll never settle her by talking, lovey, nor that Pess either. He and she are both banded together to make things hot for Master Chris. They failed once, as the murder's said to hev been committed by that Felk, so they're trying again, my deary, they're trying again."

"What are they saying?"

"I hev tole you, my sweety. They say at the hint of Master Chris you killed the old lady, and then made it up to share the property between you."

"It's a lie!"

"Of course it's a lie," said the witch patiently; "but saying it's a lie don't make things better."

"I'll go and tear Dolly's eyes out!" raged Sarah viciously.

"And a fine pair of eyes they are, deary; but pulling them out ain't no good, for that Pess is as dead against Master Chris as Dolly is."

"I know why *she* is, Mother Corn, since Master Chris wouldn't marry her; but why that Pess man should talk to spite——"

"He's not himself, deary."

"How do you mean not himself?" asked Sarah blankly.

"People as meddle with things they don't understand get into trouble. Your old missus and that Pess tried to call up the dead, and——"

"I believe they did," interrupted Mrs. Jundy, with a shudder, and threw her apron over her head. "I've

seen tables scampering about the room like rabbits, and I've heard voices whispering and laughing and sneering awful."

"I've seen all that and more, sweetie; I've done all that and more, deary."

Sarah looked nervous as she snatched her apron from her head. "Can you see spirits?" she asked in an awed whisper.

"Yes, lovey, and I can hear them, too; but it's in my blood to know how to manage them. Miss Hesmond she knows a heap also, and is what you'd say more a learned one than I am. Oh, there's things as you and others as ain't cunning know nothing about. The dead is on all sides of us, but you can't see them. I can—in this very room," ended Mother Corn, looking round with bright eyes.

Mrs. Jundy wriggled uneasily, and looked round also, as if she expected to find the small apartment filled with ghosts. "I don't like this talk even in the daytime, Mother Corn," she protested faintly. "What I hev to do is to protect myself from them as is living. How dare Dr. Pess and that Dolly say I murdered my poor Miss Agnes, as had her faults, but wasn't wholly bad? Don't they know, as every one in Wichley knows, as that Felk killed her?"

"Felk didn't," said Mother Corn coolly.

"But he did. That Inspector Hixon ses he did."

"Inspector Hixon ain't got the Sight as I've got," said the old woman in a mysterious manner. "Felk's innocent enough, though he can't prove as he is. *He* didn't murder your missus."

"Then who did?" Sarah gasped and stared.

"The Other Person, lovey."

"The Other Person? What other person?"

"Never you mind, as telling 'ud only confuse you. The time ain't ready for things to be made square. I

told Master Chris and Miss Alice in the vicarage garden as trouble was before them and dark clouds around them. And was I not right, sweetie? Ain't they been through the storm?"

"Yes," whispered Sarah, with her hands on her knees and a frightened expression on her face. "You got 'em into it; get 'em out of it."

"No, lovey, I didn't get them into the trouble. It had to come, and it's nigh at an end; but the end ain't yet. Miss Hesmond knows, and I know."

"Well," said Mrs. Jundy, half to herself, "the saying is as Wichley will never be without three witches, and you've named two. Who's the third?"

"Dolly Banks," said Mother Corn promptly. "She's got all the will to be a witch and hurt folk, only she ain't got the cunning. I don't hurt folk, nor do Miss Hesmond, and she ain't a witch as you'd say I was. But we both know more'n other people like you, lovey, and use what we know kindly, having knowledge of what 'ud happen to us if we didn't."

Sarah did not understand all this mysterious talk, and said so. Therefore Mother Corn, taking pity on her ignorance, condescended to common details and to the ordinary things of life. "Don't you take any notice, Mrs. Jundy, of what Dolly says or that Pess says. I'm going to see him and see her and see Miss Hesmond, who'll understand me. Felk and his man will be imprisoned for burglary, but they won't be hanged for a murder as they never did."

"But can you prove——"

"All the threads are lying on this palm, deary," said Mother Corn, extending a gnarled and rather dirty hand. "I can pull 'em and tangle 'em and put 'em tidy at will. For the sake of Master Chris and Miss Alice, and to get rid of that Dolly, as 'ud make a bad wife for Jem, I'm going to straighten everything. The

threads are here, lovey," and Mother Corn tapped her palm. "Now I'm going."

Sarah followed her to the door of the room. "But my character and the character of Master Chris?"

"They'll be scoured as clean as a new tin plate," said the old woman positively. "You leave things to me, lovey, and hold your tongue."

"But who murdered Miss Agnes?" demanded Sarah, catching at the blue velvet dress.

"The Other Person," repeated Mother Corn, and took her departure.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SCHEME

CHRIS was both angry and amused by Mrs. Jundy's account of Mother Corn and her ideas: angry because of the accusation directed against the housekeeper, which had no foundation in fact, and amused on account of the suggestion that the old woman would be able to straighten out things by witchcraft. He consoled with Sarah when she related the malignancy of Dolly Banks and Pess, but the young man rebuked her for credulity. That Mother Corn was possessed of superphysical powers he refused to believe, and ridiculed her pretensions.

"It's all imagination and vanity, Sarah," said Chris, shaking his head. "People are silly enough to call Mother Corn a witch because she possesses some herbal knowledge, and has cured some of them of rheumatic pains. But it's all rubbish, and she only lays claim to these pretended powers in order to make her clients give her money. There are no such things as witches."

"Beg pardon, Master Chris," said Sarah sharply, "but the Bible says as there are witches, and says as you mustn't let 'em live. You ain't going against the Holy Book, are you?"

"Things have changed since it was written, Sarah. Modern civilization and modern science have done away with such superstition."

"The Bible ain't superstition."

"I never said that it was. The Bible is a good book, a wonderful book, and if we do what the Bible tells us we can't go far wrong."

"Then if you believe in one part of the Bible you must believe in the other, Master Chris; and if there wasn't witches there wouldn't be laws in the Bible against 'em. Besides, 'tis well known as Wichley will never be without three witches, and that's why it's called by its name. So there!"

"Superstition, superstition. And who are the three witches?"

"Oh, you may smile and smile, Master Chris, but smiling don't do away with facts, whatever you may say. Mother Corn's a witch, and Miss Hesmond's another, and Dolly Banks is the third—only she ain't as clever as the other two."

Chris grew really angry. "Sarah, I forbid you to call Miss Hesmond a witch."

"Well, Master Chris, it ain't no harm in calling her a thing as you say don't exist," said Sarah doggedly.

Larcher, caught in his own trap, laughed, and grew calmer. "You have me there, Sarah, you have me there. At the same time you mustn't connect Miss Hesmond with Mother Corn and her rubbish. As to Dolly Banks, she's a silly, spiteful little fool, who ought to be whipped."

Sarah agreed. "And whipped she'd be if I had my way. Taking folk's character away indeed! I never heard such wickedness."

"Miss Hesmond has queer ideas, as we all know," went on Larcher seriously, "but she is a good church-woman and a kind-hearted woman. I have every reason to say so, bless her. A witch indeed! Rubbish!"

"She's a witch—a white witch," persisted the house-keeper, "and Dolly Banks is a black witch."

"And what is Mother Corn?" asked Chris dryly.

"A grey witch; sometimes bad and sometimes

good, as the fit takes her. Oh, it is no use your talking, Master Chris. Mother Corn knows a thing or two, and she's going to put things right for you and for Miss Alice and for me. Why, she don't believe that Felk murdered Miss Agnes."

"Oh, doesn't she?" said Larcher sarcastically. "Then who did?"

"The Other Person," said Sarah Jundy, echoing the old woman.

Chris looked puzzled, as well he might. "What other person?"

"I don't know. Mother Corn wouldn't say anything more."

"Sarah, you really must try and be less credulous. Mother Corn is talking nonsense, and it is extraordinary that so sensible a woman as you should believe what she says. I shall see Inspector Hixon, and tell him the reports which Dolly and Pess are spreading. He will be able to deal with them much better than this old fool will."

Sarah shook her head, still unconvinced. "Mother Corn has all the threads of the business in her hands and she will straighten them out. I'm sure," ended Mrs. Jundy, "as they are tangled enough now."

Chris gave over trying to argue her out of this belief. Sarah was firmly persuaded that Mother Corn was possessed of magic powers, and believed in her much more than she did in Hixon. Going by circumstantial evidence, the inspector and every one else credited Felk with the crime, and Mrs. Jundy had been of the same opinion until Mother Corn had spoken. Now she insisted that Felk was innocent, notwithstanding plain facts; but who was guilty she was, of course, unable to say. But Mother Corn knew the individual who was termed the Other Person, and Sarah declared that the individual in question would be named by the witch

and arrested by the inspector in time to prevent Felk from being hanged. Also Dolly would be punished, along with Dr. Pess, for taking away people's characters, and here again Mother Corn would act as the goddess out of the machine. Indeed, there was no end to the wonders which Mrs. Jundy believed the old woman could perform, and she was laughed at by the Manor House servants as well as by the master of the Manor House. All the same, Sarah stuck to her guns, and comforted herself with a proverb. "Them as laughs last laughs best," said Mrs. Jundy sententiously.

To the surprise of Larcher, and somewhat to his annoyance, Miss Hesmond took Mother Corn's ridiculous chatter seriously. She made Chris relate all that he had heard, and then sent for the housekeeper to get the evidence first-hand; and as the necessary result of these conversations she invited Mother Corn to come and see her. While waiting for the arrival of the old hag, Chris expostulated with his best friend, and pointed out that there was really nothing to learn. Felk had been arrested for the second burglary, and had confessed to the first; and since he had robbed Mrs. Baltin of her jewels, he undoubtedly was the assassin.

"Undoubtedly Felk stole the diamonds," admitted Miss Hesmond immediately, "as the settings of the brooch and bracclets and rings were found in his house. He confesses that he is the thief, but declares that he took the diamonds from the dead body."

"He says that to save his neck."

"He might; he probably would. All the same, Chris, I have an uneasy feeling, and I have always had one, that in spite of the strong circumstantial evidence the man may be innocent after all."

"I can't see it," said Larcher, with a worried look;

"and if Felk is not guilty, who is? You don't suspect Sarah here, I suppose?"

"Me?" screamed Sarah, who was an attentive listener. "Why, I wouldn't hurt a fly, much less Miss Agnes, as had her good p'int, though she was a worrit, I don't deny. Dolly Banks is a liar, and so is that wicked shrimp of a doctor."

"I don't accuse you, Sarah," said Miss Hesmond in a kindly tone; "not for one moment do I accuse you. Dr. Pess and that wretched girl are only spreading these reports so as to hurt Mr. Larcher through you."

"I don't mind being hurt so long as Master Chris is safe," said Mrs. Jundy magnanimously. "He's the apple of my eye and the core of my heart."

"Sarah, Sarah"—Chris took the fond old woman's hand—"you are growing hysterical with all this trouble. Come home with me and lie down."

"Oh, I'll come, Master Chris," sobbed Sarah, who really was greatly upset. "So long as Mother Corn and Miss Hesmond are doing what they can I ain't got no fears for you, my deary boy. But I do hope as you'll give that Pess and that gel notice to clear out of Wichley, as you can by Act of Parliament. I can't live in the same village with 'em, much less the same room, by which I mean the room for the village and the village for the room. I'm sure I don't know what I'm saying."

"You are saying," translated Miss Hesmond, "that you couldn't live in the same room with your evil-wishers, much less in the same village."

"Begging your pardon, miss, I don't mean that nohow. What I do mean is that I couldn't live in the same village with 'em, much less in the same room. But I do feel muddled, and that's a fact. Master Chris, I've took you home heaps an' heaps of times

when you was a dear thing under age. Do the same by me, I beg, now, as I'm a dropping leaf."

Chris soothed his old nurse, whose bonnet was awry and whose dress was disordered, then nodded to Miss Hesmond, and led her out of the cottage home to the Manor House. Poor Mrs. Jundy resigned her duties for the day to the butler, and went to bed, requesting to be called when Mother Corn had straightened things out. Chris promised to do all she wanted, and finally Sarah went to sleep, and gave her poor worried brain a rest. The sight of the faithful old creature's anguish did not tend to make Chris feel particularly friendly towards Dolly and her accomplice, who had made so much mischief. Privately he determined to get Pess and the girl out of the village when everything was put right. While they remained there was no doubt they would continue to give him all the trouble they could. At the same time Chris did not think that Mother Corn was the genius to put matters right, and looked to Hixon for relief. He had profound faith in the inspector's cleverness—as much faith as his nurse had in Jem Trap's grandmother.

Meanwhile Mother Corn had arrived at Miss Hesmond's cottage, and was having a long and exhaustive conversation with the old maid. Much of what they said would have been high Dutch to the ordinary person, for they were dealing with matters connected with the Unseen, which to them was the Seen. As Miss Hesmond knew, Mother Corn was possessed of psychic and clairvoyant faculties, which she made use of for very good purposes, and really possessed extraordinary powers, at which a scientific man would frankly scoff. At the present moment the world is so material in its ideas that nothing is believed but what is visible to the physical eye. But both

these women know beyond all doubt that those gifted with certain faculties could see and hear much more than the ordinary person. Nevertheless, Mother Corn did not disdain to make use of physical assistance, and informed Miss Hesmond that she had sent a message for Inspector Hixon to come to see her.

"Will he come here?" asked the old maid anxiously, for she wished to see the inspector herself.

Mother Corn nodded cheerfully. "Yes, lovey, he will. I was coming here when I got your message, and beforehand I had sent to that policeman to meet me under your roof. He won't be long," added the old woman, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece, "as he ain't got far to come, and I asked him to hurry up."

"What do you intend to tell him?" asked Miss Hesmond dubiously. "You know he won't believe in anything we have been talking about."

"No, he won't; and why should he when there ain't that in him which can prove the truth of things he can't see? Lord bless you, deary, 'tain't any good telling the blind to see the sun rising or the moon setting. Folk eat and drink and make fools of themselves in various ways, never thinking as we know that they are being watched and guided and led to a certain end. But *we* know."

"Yes, we know. All the same, Mrs. Corn, I wish you would not call yourself a witch, or me either, as you did to Sarah Jundy."

"What's in a name, lovey? There's witches and witches, as we hev heard—white ones and black ones."

"Yes; but to people the name conveys only one idea. Every one flouts the notion that there *are* witches, and, if they do believe, think they are devoted to the black art."

"They don't know that they're talking about," said Mother Corn indulgently; "but bless you, sweetie, what do it matter how the children behave, for children most folk are in their narrowness? They can't burn us or torture us as they did a hundred years ago, so we can go on our way rejoicing. I only said to Mrs. Jundy as you are a witch because, like me, you can see things and hear a lot. You hev a kind of religion, though, which I ain't got."

"There is only one religion, Mrs. Corn."

"Dozens, lovey, dozens, and sects likewise."

"There is only one religion," repeated Miss Hesmond calmly, "and in that I believe. Love God and love your neighbour. That is at the root of every religion that has been preached or ever will be preached. I have more scientific knowledge of the Other Side than you have, although my natural powers of clairvoyance are not so great. But I am not a witch, nor are you, Mrs. Corn, so do not make use of the word, which to most people conveys a wrong meaning."

"Well, I won't," promised the old woman, blinking her eyes; "but witches or not, deary, you and me make use of what we have to help others."

"That is so. Then let us help Felk out of his danger."

Mother Corn nodded. "He's a bad one, for sure."

"That means he is ignorant."

"Well, you can put it in that nice way, sweetie, if you like. But what I say is as if I can prove his innocence of the murder it won't do him any good. He'll go on being bad just the same."

"Well, in any case he will be imprisoned for the two burglaries for many years, so he will be out of harm's way, and will not be able to hurt other people. And bad as he is, Mrs. Corn, he is entitled to justice."

"Oh, I'll see that he gets it, lovey. Bad as he is, he ain't so bad as that Pess man or as that Banks gel."

"I don't think that Dr. Pess is really bad," replied Miss Hesmond reflectively. "His nature is really a good one. But by lending his body to those on the Other Side he has committed himself to a dangerous path. Then his physical troubles have warped his cheery nature. He has lost his good friend Mrs. Baltin, he has lost his money, and I hear he is losing his practice. I am very sorry for the man."

"You hev a kind heart, deary," said the visitor in a soothing manner. "And are you sorry for that wicked gel?"

"I think she deserves most pity of all concerned," said Miss Hesmond emphatically. "Think of what pain and suffering she is making for herself by her ignorant wickedness!"

"Well, you are a saint, my dear," said Mother Corn admiringly. "I ain't so forgiving as you, and, what's more, I don't see myself so kind as to let that girl marry Jem. She'd influence him against me, and turn me out of my little home. No, sweetie, that Banks gel's a bad 'un, and I hope she'll be punished."

"Of course she will be punished. She can only learn what she has to learn by being punished. However, we have discussed her enough. Mr. Hixon will be here shortly. Tell me what you intend to do."

"Ask him to come to my little home, and hide in one room while I see Dr. Pess in another," said Mother Corn promptly.

"Will Dr. Pess come to you?"

"Oh, yes. He's in trouble, and can't get at his friends in the next world to gain advice. He needs stronger aid to lift the veil, and that aid, you know, my deary, I can give him. When he speaks——"

Mother Corn stopped, and glanced significantly at her hostess.

Miss Hesmond looked uncomfortable. "It doesn't seem to be quite fair."

"Oh, it's fair enough. Better that the truth should come out in that way than that Felk should be hanged for what he did not commit."

"Will Dr. Pess confess that he is guilty?"

"Lord bless you no, lovey. He ain't guilty. Why should he strangle a lady as was going to make a will giving him money?"

"Ah! but you know that at the last séance the spirits told Mrs. Baltin to let the old will stand and become reconciled to her nephew."

"Yes, I know," Mother Corn nodded good-humouredly, "and she sent Sarah Jundy to fetch Master Chris. That's all right, lovey. But whether the will was to be made or not, there wasn't any reason for Dr. Pess to kill his very best and kindest friend."

"No"—Miss Hesmond shivered—"there certainly was not."

"But the Other Person, deary?"

"Oh, don't talk of the Other Person."

Mother Corn shrugged her old shoulders, and looked keenly at her hostess with the darkest and most piercing of eyes. "Well, then, I won't. But you know what I know, deary, and you know as well as the life's in you as what I say is true."

Miss Hesmond nodded. "I know it is true. Poor, poor man!"

"Well, if folk will play with fire they're bound to get burned," said Mother Corn coolly, and took a pinch of snuff. "We can't consider Pess, you know, my sweet, when a life's at stake. And when Felk's character is cleared so far, he'll get quite enough punishment for the other things he hev done. And remember, Miss

Hesmond, as what I'm going to do will clear Master Chris and Miss Alice from trouble once and for all, besides stopping Jem from marrying that gel as is such a bad 'un."

"And Dr. Pess?"

"He hev sown, and he must reap," said Mother Corn, with a shrug. "He hev free-will, as you and me hev, to do good or bad, so what can we do but try and stop him from upsetting things? You don't think as I'm doing wrong?"

"No"—Miss Hesmond roused herself and glanced at the clock—"I certainly do not think that. There is no other way of getting at the truth, and we must save Felk's life, come what may. But will you tell Mr Hixon what you intend to do?"

"Not everything, lovey, not everything. All I ask him to do is to hide in the next room with Green, the policeman, and listen to what Dr. Pess ses."

"But whatever Dr. Pess says, Mr. Hixon may not believe him."

"Oh, I'll prove to the two policemen that what he ses is true," said Mother Corn firmly. "Yes, I know what I'm about, lovey, none better. And here comes that inspector of yours, sweetie. Don't tell him what we hev been talking about."

"He would laugh at us if he heard our conversation, and would probably refuse to go to your cottage."

Mother Corn nodded her assent. "He's only a child like the rest of 'em. Grown up in his business, and a child in all else."

Inspector Hixon appeared in due course, and appeared in uniform, as he had long since returned to his duties. He shook hands warmly with Miss Hesmond, and then turned to look doubtfully at the visitor. Mother Corn smiled blandly when she saw how closely the young man was examining her face.

"Don't go by looks, Mr. Policeman," she said lightly. "I'm old and ugly, and I ain't got what you'd call proper means of keeping myself alive. All the same, I'm honest through and through."

"Yes, I think you are," rejoined Hixon, who noted how open was her gaze and how alert she was in every way, "and I suppose Miss Hesmond here will vouch for your honesty?"

"I certainly do, Mr. Hixon. I have known Mrs. Corn for forty years and more."

Hixon still continued to look at the old witch. "I can trust her, then?"

"Yes; you can trust her as you trust me."

"Then I shall do so. Your word is good enough for me, Miss Hesmond. And now, Mrs. Corn," added the inspector, taking a seat, "what is this you have to tell me, and why did you send so pressing a message?"

"If I hadn't sent a pressing message you wouldn't hev come, sir."

"That is true. It was because of your assertion in the message that Felk was innocent that I came so quickly. That, of course, is rubbish."

"It's true. Felk is a robber, Mr. Policeman, but he ain't a murderer."

"Then is Mrs. Jundy the culprit? I have heard rumours to that effect lately."

"No, she ain't," declared Mother Corn fiercely. "Sarah Jundy's as good a woman as her as hev set this gossip going is bad."

"You mean Dolly Banks?"

"That's her," the old woman nodded emphatically. "She and Pess hev put their heads together to make trouble."

"I thought I had stopped all that," said Hixon sharply.

Mother Corn laughed heartily. "You might as well stop the ocean from moving as stop a jealous woman from being revenged on the man as wouldn't hev anything to do with her. That Banks gel wanted to marry Master Chris, and——"

"Yes, yes! I know all about that," broke in Hixon impatiently.

"Oh, no, you don't. If you had known, sir, you'd ha' made sure Dolly would hev given up her wickedness. She accused Master Chris, and the way in which Felk was brought to book stopped that business. Now she's accusing Sarah Jundy so as to hurt Master Chris, who loves his old nurse like the kind gentleman he is, bless him. And it's only fair as I should save Felk's life, sir, ain't it, seeing as he's as innocent of murder as an unborn babe?"

"But if Felk is innocent, and Sarah Jundy is innocent, who is guilty?" asked the inspector, who was beginning to feel bewildered.

"The Other Person."

"The Other Person? What other person?"

"Dr. Pess will tell you."

"Dr. Pess? What has he to do with the business?"

"He'll tell you himself," said Mother Corn with a positive air.

Hixon rose. "Oh, will he? Then I'll call and see him at once."

Miss Hesmond touched the inspector's shoulder, and induced him to sit down again. "If you go to Pess, you will hear nothing. Do what Mrs. Corn advises."

"And what does Mrs. Corn advise?"

"Don't get angry, my good gentleman," said the old woman, smiling. "What I ask you to do is a very little thing. This afternoon Dr. Pess is coming to see me in my little home. I want you to be in the next

room with Green, our village policeman, so as to listen to what is said."

"Is Pess going to make a confession?"

"Oh, yes; he'll confess." And Mrs. Corn smiled slightly.

"But is he guilty of this murder?"

"No; he's perfectly innocent. A man as expects to get money from a lady don't go and strangle that lady, and spile his chance of cash."

"Then this Pess knows who is guilty?"

"No, he don't."

Hixon jumped up and looked at the old woman. "Are you making a fool of me?" he asked angrily.

"If so, you'd better not, or——"

"Wait! wait!" Miss Hesmond implored the impetuous officer. "Don't be rash, I beg. Wait and see."

"See what?"

"What I can show you," said Mother Corn calmly; "and I'm trying to show you in a way in which you will believe."

Hixon was suddenly struck with an idea, and turned rather irritably towards Miss Hesmond. "Has all this anything to do with the spiritualism which Mrs. Baltin indulged in? I have heard a good deal of that, and they call this good lady a witch in the village. If it has, I shall have nothing to do with it."

Mother Corn prevented Miss Hesmond's reply. "You needn't trouble about spiritualism, Mr. Policeman. I shall be able to give you practical proof as to who murdered Mrs. Baltin. Yes, sir, a proof which will be enough in any court of law. But"—Mother Corn lifted a gnarled finger—"you must let me give the proof in my own way."

"What do you say, Miss Hesmond?" asked the inspector irresolutely.

" I advise you to do what Mrs. Corn asks you to do," she answered earnestly.

" Of course you do, lovey, knowing me as an honest one."

Hixon thought for a moment. " I'll come to your cottage with Green and act as you advise," he said sharply ; " but I must confess that I don't know what you are driving at."

Mother Corn chuckled. " It ain't hard to guess that, Mr. Policeman. I want to put Master Chris and Miss Alice right ; I wish to punish that Banks gel, and save Felk from being hanged. I can do these things, sir. Come along ! "

Hixon went. He was intensely puzzled, but he went. And Mother Corn smiled like the old sphinx she truly was.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRUTH

ABOUT four o'clock Hixon and his underling presented themselves at the cottage of Mother Corn. The abode of the old woman was situated some distance down a quiet rural lane, which meandered into the country and faced spacious meadows. With its whitewashed walls and thatched roof, the humble dwelling stood in the middle of a crowded garden, surrounded by a neatly-trimmed quickset hedge. What with flowers and fruit-trees, a vegetable plot, beehives, and a poultry yard, there was scarcely room to move. Beyond the enclosure, at the rear of the house, was a small paddock, wherein grazed Mother Corn's pony and three or four goats. Here also was a haystack fenced in from the greed of the animals, a cart, and a tumble-down shed filled with agricultural implements. All was fish that came to the old woman's net, and she begged and borrowed and bought all over the parish. Report also said that she stole, but this was never clearly proved. Her whole domain presented an appearance of plenty and prosperity, which proved that Mother Corn had no need to trouble her head about possible poverty. And as the crown of her good fortune she also was in receipt of the old age pension.

On this occasion Mother Corn received her visitors in a green satin gown, the splendour of which was rather marred by the inevitable linen sun-bonnet and tartan shawl. The dress, indeed, was more suited to a ballroom than to a farmyard, and the old hag had obtained it by begging, as she obtained many other

things. In fact, Mother Corn was a thrifty and more or less unscrupulous person, who invariably looked after herself. But it must be admitted that the results of her policy were so good that, in her turn, she was enabled to look after those still poorer than herself. She had many good points, and, on the whole, was not unpopular, although she was feared on account of her presumed witchcraft. And even this fear she turned to good account, as people were afraid to offend her, and frequently made her small gifts. Still, on the whole she was a decent old body, and did more good than harm.

"He'll be here in half an hour, Mr. Policeman," said Mother Corn, as she conducted her visitors into the house. "All you and the other cove hev to do is to stay in this room and listen."

"I should like to see also," suggested the inspector, looking round the small bedroom into which he and Green had been led.

"And why not, sir?" questioned Mother Corn, with an expansive smile. "There's a knot-hole in the door which is just made for spying. With your eye to it there ain't a thing as will escape you."

Green, the constable, grinned at the old woman's freedom of speech, and took his seat on the truckle-bed which was the couch of Jem Trap. The big man had gone out for a couple of hours, as his grandmother informed Hixon that she did not wish him messing about while dealing with the doctor. The inspector was still somewhat perplexed about the business, as he did not understand how Mother Corn intended to proceed, and was puzzled to know what Pess had to do with the business. According to his hostess, the doctor was not guilty himself, nor did he know who was guilty, therefore it seemed to Hixon that this was a case of great cry and little wool. Mother

Corn saw his bewilderment, and drew him for a moment or so into the outer room.

"Mr. Policeman," she whispered, so that Green in the bedroom should not hear, "things looks queer, as you may say, but trust me for knowing what I'm about. Whatever you see or hear, say nothing until I give the signal for you to come out and lay hands on him."

"Then he is guilty?" exclaimed the officer.

"No, he ain't," retorted the woman positively. "It's no use my explaining, as seeing and hearing is better nor telling. I may do things which to you will be queer, as I ses; but don'y spile what I'm doing, or nothing will come of the business."

"If it's your reported witchcraft," said Hixon bluntly, "you may as well drop talking and doing. I don't believe in such things."

Mother Corn chuckled. "You will see what you will see, and you will hear what you will hear, lovey. I don't say but what I may hev to do a bit of witchley business, me being half a gipsy, and knowing much as you gorgeous ones ain't got any idea of. All I arsk is as you'll stay quiet until I ses you're to come out and do your share."

Hixon promised, sorely puzzled as he was, and doubtful as he felt as to the success of whatever scheme Mother Corn proposed to carry through. Also he confessed to himself privately that he was intensely curious to learn the meaning of all this mystery, which he felt was something out of the ordinary. Of course, witchcraft was all rubbish, and a practical man such as he was did not believe in it. Nevertheless, even if Mother Corn dealt in her black magic, he resolved to remain quiet and obey her, if only to see if there was anything in her pretended powers. When all was over, then he could

take what steps he considered to be necessary to deal both with the woman herself and with the doctor. And having thus made up his mind to see the thing through, Hixon returned to the inner room, closed the door, and applied his eye to the knot-hole. Green being of a stolid nature, and not at all inquisitive, sat quietly on the bed with folded arms, and awaited orders. For thirty minutes the two officers remained like this.

Then Dr. Pess made his appearance, escorted by Mother Corn, who had gone to watch for him at the gate. Pess looked thin and ill and dissipated. Since his troubles he had taken to drink, and in a wonderfully short space of time alcohol had worked great havoc. He was sober enough now, but his lips were dry, his face was inflamed, and he trembled and twitched in every limb. Mother Corn placed a seat for him in such a position that he faced the bedroom door behind which Hixon was watching, and then shook her finger at him.

"You're behaving foolish-like, doctor," warned the old woman seriously. "Why, you ain't nothing but a shadder of what you was."

"I'm worried to death," said Pess hoarsely. "Everything has gone wrong with me since the death of Mrs. Baltin."

"Everything hev gone wrong because you've taken up with that Banks gel, as is spiteful and vicious at Master Chris because he didn't marry her. And why didn't he?" demanded Mother Corn dramatically. "'Cause there wasn't any reason why he should."

"I hate Larcher," said Pess between his teeth and with suppressed fury. "All my troubles are owing to him."

"Oh, deary, you're a sad fool. Why, Master

Chris ain't done nothing, and well do you know it. He didn't kill the missus, he didn't make you lose your money in that bank, nor did he tell you to take up with that wicked gel."

"I believe that Larcher *did* murder his aunt," retorted Pess sullenly, "or Sarah Jundy did it for him."

"She didn't hev no call to do that, doctor."

"Yes, she had. Mrs. Baltin discharged her."

"Why, the missus discharged her again and again; she was allays at it, deary. I knows as the missus never intended Sarah should go, and Sarah knew as much."

"Then she murdered Mrs. Baltin so as to stop her making the will in my favour, since she is crazy about Larcher."

"And why shouldn't she be crazy?" asked Mother Corn tartly. "She nussed him on her knee, and loves him as a parrot do sugar. If you was a woman, doctor, you'd know how a woman feels about sich things. But you ain't a woman, only a poor fool as is running your silly head against a stone wall."

Pess rose wrathfully. "I didn't come here to hear you abusing me," he said in a voice husky with drink. "Why did you ask me to come, you old hag?"

"Don't you call names, or I'll give you toko, deary," retorted Mother Corn in a quiet voice, for she felt herself to be quite mistress of the situation, "and that, doctor, is a Romany word meaning something you wouldn't like. Why did I arsk you here, ses you? 'Cause I'm a kind-hearted sort of pusson as is sorry for the silly way you're going on. Where's your sense when you lends yourself to that gel's spite again Master Chris? She twisted you round her finger, and made you say things as you didn't oughter to

hev said nohow. Master Chris is as innercent as an unborn babe, and so is Sarah Jundy, and so is Jem Trap."

"Then you believe that Felk really killed my dear old friend?"

"No; he didn't do it either," said Mother Corn mysteriously. "But why trouble about them things, lovey? Just you leave 'em alone, and turn over a new leaf in a far country."

"And how am I to get to a far country?" asked Pess querulously. "I have not a penny, and my house is only rented, while my furniture is mortgaged. As to my practice, it has gone down so much that I can't sell it. I'm all broken up and miserable beyond telling."

"Ah, deary, the ways of the wicked is hard," said Mother Corn.

"I'm not wicked," cried Pess, weeping, for his manly courage was completely gone, "only miserable."

"Well, folk say as you're wicked because of your doings along of Dolly Banks' spite and wild hatred of Master Chris. But I know better, lovey. You ain't a wicked man, only foolish-like. You thinks as you know a lot about spirits, my dear, and gave yourself up to 'em. But they knows a lot more about you, and 'tis all their doing what you've suffered."

"No, no! I have always been advised splendidly by my Friends," said Pess, drying his tears. "If I could only get them to give me a message, I would soon be out of all these troubles. And it is because I know you can get me a message that I came here. You have sat with me before, Mrs. Corn, and we have obtained good results. Sit with me now, and let us hear what the spirits advise."

Mother Corn pretended reluctance. "I've given up a lot of table-turning and rapping and calling dead

folk out of the Beyond," she said hesitatingly. "Miss Hesmond, as knows more nor I do, told me as 'twas wrong."

"Don't talk to me of Miss Hesmond!" cried the little man violently. "She is a friend of Larcher's, and as such is against me."

"That may be, but she knows a lot more about the other world than you or me do, doctor," said the old woman coolly; "and if we sit, deary, we'll be playing with fire."

"If anything would make me sit, it would be because you have said that," cried the doctor vehemently. "Miss Hesmond wishes to prevent my getting advice from my Friends. She knows that you alone in the village can help me, and she has set you against me. Well"—he rose with a reckless air—"I shall go to Town and consult a professional medium."

"There ain't no need for that, deary. I'm willing to sit."

"Now?"

"Why, yes. And as I think you're a better medium nor me, you'd better give yourself up to Them, and I'll take down what They say."

"I'd rather you were the medium," said Pess reluctantly

"Well, I can't be, and I shan't be," rejoined the old witch tartly. "I'll lend you my power to help you into the trance, and will tell you arterwards what the Friends advise. But I shan't do no more. You can take it or leave it."

"I'll do what you say," said Pess, settling himself more comfortably in his chair. "Anything is better than this suspense. And you will report to me in a most faithful manner what They say through me?"

Mother Corn solemnly swore that she would act as he desired, and then drew the brown cloth curtain across

the one window of the room. Hixon, looking through the knot-hole, could scarcely see in the semi-darkness thus produced, but gradually his eye became more accustomed to the obscurity. He was rather disgusted with all this hanky-panky, as he called it, and but for his promise to the old woman he would have stepped out to stop the whole uncanny business. But he had given his word to remain quiet for the time being, and, moreover, he was curious to see what would transpire. Now that he could see better in the artificial twilight he noted that Pess was lying stiff and motionless in one chair, while Mother Corn was seated quietly on the other. After a time the old woman began to rock quietly to and fro, singing softly some weird gipsy strain, which produced a soporific effect on the doctor. He began to nod, he closed his eyes, then his chin fell on his chest, and he appeared to be sound asleep. Mother Corn continued to murmur in an undertone like a swarm of bees hiving, and kept her glittering black eyes fixed on the bowed head of her companion. The room was quite silent, and only the continuous murmur of Mother Corn could be heard. Then her voice died away, and not a sound could be heard. Unimaginative as Hixon was, he felt his hair rise and his flesh creep at the moment. It seemed to him—some sixth sense told him—that in the outer room were presences, invisible, but powerful and malignant. For the time being he fully believed in the witchcraft of Mother Corn.

Suddenly the old woman stiffened herself in her chair and began to ask questions. At the sound of her voice Pess lifted his head and sat upright, with closed eyes, with his feet placed close together, and his hands resting on his knees. When he replied Hixon was struck by the tone he spoke in. Formerly the doctor's voice had been husky with drink and tremulous with

fear. But now he spoke clearly and coldly and loudly, so that every word could be heard both by the inspector and by Green. Hixon made a sign to his underling to listen, but there was no need. Green, with bated breath and his head stretched forward, was hearkening to every question and answer, stirred to as profound a curiosity as was his superior officer. And Mother Corn conducted the strange conversation.

"Have you come?" she asked softly.

"Yes," said Pess, or the person who spoke through Pess.

"Who is it?"

"Simon Grain."

"Aye, I thought so. A nice lot of mischief you have been making!"

Pess chuckled in an unearthly manner, and Hixon's blood ran cold. "I told Agnes that I would come back to punish her for behaving so wickedly to me, and I have done what I wanted."

"You strangled her?"

"Yes! This body I am using now was given up freely by its owner, and I used it to punish Agnes. She is now in *this* world, although I have not seen her."

"You'll be punished for this—punished dreadfully."

"I am ready to take whatever punishment I may get now that I have revenged myself on Agnes. What I told her I would do I have done."

"But you have got Dr. Pess into trouble."

"I can't help that," said the voice. "He has free-will, as we all have, both on your side and ours. He need not have surrendered his body as he did. But I was not going to lose the chance of getting back to punish Agnes."

"How did you manage the dreadful business?" asked the old woman in rather a trembling voice.

" Dr. Pess held a séance with Agnes, and I told her, through him, to become reconciled with her nephew and keep him as her heir. I have no ill-will against Larcher, and for that reason I spoke as I did."

" You spoke different at first ? "

" That was to gain my own ends and protect Pess, whose body I am using. As a will was by my instructions to be made in his favour, no one would believe or did believe that he would—presumably it was him, you know—murder Agnes and deprive himself of the money."

" I understand," said Mother Corn, after a pause. " Then why do you give him away now, when you know that the officers of justice are listening ? "

" Because I wish to clear the characters of every one else. When it becomes known that Pess—that is really me, only no one will believe it—has murdered Agnes, all other people will cease to be suspected. Felk and Larcher and Jem Trap and Sarah Jundy, whom I knew in Somersetshire, will all be at peace."

" But the doctor, whose body you are using now ? "

" He has himself to blame. For years he has been giving himself up to us on this side, and has lost command of his body. What with drink and worry and wicked thoughts, he is a prey to any one of us who choose to use his body. I shall not use it again, as I have done what I wanted, and have only returned this time to protect innocent people from being accused. But others will use this body, and matters will grow worse and worse for Pess. It is better to put an end to it."

" By allowing him to be hanged for a crime he never committed ? "

" He won't be hanged," said the voice calmly. " No one will believe that he has been used by me, as

no one believes that such a thing can happen. He will be called mad, and will be incarcerated in a lunatic asylum."

"That will be cruel to him."

"No, for he will really be mad—that is, he, having lost command over his body by yielding it to us, will be dominated by this person and that from the near spirit-world. Pess has only himself to blame. He has played with fire, and he must learn his lesson."

"His lesson?"

"Yes. That he must be himself always; keep control of his body, and never allow spirits to govern it in any way."

"You are a bad spirit," said Mother Corn wrathfully, "but tell me how you managed to commit the deed?"

"Very easily," said Pess, with another chuckle. "When the doctor left at nine o'clock I took possession of his body before he left the park. Agnes saw Sarah Jundy at half-past nine, and sent her for her nephew. Sarah left the Manor House at a quarter to ten. I then—in this body, mind—stole back to the casement which I had arranged, through Agnes, should be opened. Agnes was writing, and when she saw Pess, as she believed, climbing in was annoyed and alarmed. However, I said that I had a new message for her, and was in the room before she could prevent me. Agnes was brave, I don't deny, and did not call the servants. Why should she when Pess was her friend? I spoke to her, and after a time, watching my opportunity, I strangled her. Then I climbed out of the window again and went down to the park gates. There I slipped out of the body of Pess, and allowed him to take command of it again. Naturally, not knowing what time had elapsed, and finding himself walking home as he was doing when I obsessed him, Pess did not think that anything was wrong. No one was more astonished

than Pess when he heard of the murder. He really believed that Larcher was guilty, that Felk was guilty, that Sarah Jundy was guilty. *I did the deed, and, although those officers in hiding won't believe what is now being said, you can prove to them practically that the man whose body I am using strangled Agnes—that is, I did, using the body. I'm going now.*"

"One moment," said Mrs. Corn quickly. "Did Felk really rob the dead body?"

"Oh, yes. He slipped in through the casement which I left open, and took the diamonds while his man watched. He would have robbed the house but that Sarah Jundy and Larcher came back so soon. Then Sarah lost her head and advised Larcher wrongly, so he went away to remain quiet until she knocked him up."

Mother Corn spoke roughly. "You are wicked and evil. You have got this poor man into trouble, and have robbed another human being of her body. Think how awful your punishment will be!"

"I am ready to accept any punishment I may be given," said the voice somewhat sullenly. "Agnes treated me badly, and Pess gave me the chance of taking my rightful revenge. I don't care; it's his own fault. I'm going now," said the voice for the second time.

"Then go, and may God forgive you for the evil you have done!" cried Mother Corn so energetically that Hixon, who had been fascinated by all this weird conversation, woke as if from a trance.

The inspector looked at Green, whose ruddy face was pale, and then with an effort, for he was somewhat shaken in his incredulity, opened the door. As he stepped into the outer room Mother Corn rose and pointed to Dr. Pess. The little man was now quite his normal self, sullen and sick, trembling and nervous.

But he exhibited no fear when he saw the two men in uniform, but merely looked at Mother Corn.

"Why are the police here?" he asked with listless curiosity.

"They are here to arrest you," said the old woman in a stifled tone.

"Wait a bit," said Hixon before the astonished doctor could reply. "Not so fast, Mrs. Corn. All this that has taken place is rubbish. I can't arrest any one on the silly evidence which no court of law would accept."

"Ask him if what has passed is rubbish," said Mother Corn, pointing a crooked finger at the doctor. "He knows that what was said is true."

"What was said?" repeated the doctor eagerly. "Well, and what did my Friends on the Other Side say?"

"Friends indeed!" said Mother Corn. "Nice friends, you poor soul! Simon Grain came and said that he made use of your body to strangle Mrs. Baltin."

"It's a lie! It's impossible!"

"To these two policemen it is impossible," she retorted, "but you know better, doctor. You have yielded your body freely to the use of the spirits, and one of them has taken it to kill the woman he hated."

"It's a bad spirit, who is telling lies," cried Pess vehemently. "No one will believe the story."

"I shan't for one," said Hixon, with a shrug, "nor will Green here. You have brought us on a wild-goose chase, Mrs. Corn."

"Wait a minute," said the woman, stretching out her arm commandingly. "You will not accept the spirit proof, nor did I think you would. But I can prove that Pess committed this crime."

"I did not! I did not!" shouted the alarmed doctor, trembling and white.

"Quite true. *You* did not; but Simon Grain in your body did." She turned towards the two policemen, who were much puzzled. "On the night when Mrs. Baltin was murdered I stole into the park to get herbs. I had sent Jem to get them, but Mrs. Baltin turned him away. As I wanted certain herbs which are only to be found in the park, I went myself by night. Jem and Dolly walked with me to the gates, and I slipped in. While I was in the park they walked round the walls outside, waiting for me, and it was then that they saw Master Chris go into the Manor House and leave it again."

Hixon nodded. "Go on," he said gravely. "There is truth in what you say."

"I got the herbs and put 'em in my basket," went on Mother Corn, wiping her dry lips, for she was very much agitated. "Then I saw that the drawing-room was lighted up, and stole up to the windows to look in. While I was watching Mrs. Baltin writing I saw Dr. Pess walk swiftly up to the casement near me, which I knew was open. He entered the room quickly, and after some talk he strangled Mrs. Baltin."

"It's a lie!—a lie!—a lie!" cried Pess in a frenzy.

"Why didn't you give the alarm?" asked Hixon sharply.

"What!" inquired the old woman derisively, "and me trespassing? Why, it was as like as not as I'd hev been run in for killing the missus. No, I ran away as hard as I could, and slipped out of the park gates, which were ajar. There I met Dolly and Jem, but I said nothing to them and went home. But he"—she pointed to Pess—"is guilty in the way you know how—that is, he ain't guilty himself, but that black devil Simon Grain used his body to——"

"It's a lie!—a lie!" cried Pess again. "You can't arrest me on what Simon Grain says."

"No," said Hixon dryly, and laying his hand on his shoulder, "but I can arrest you on what Mrs. Corn says. She saw you commit the crime. Come along!"

"No, no, no!" shrieked the doctor, and fought and bit and scratched and swore and cried. He was in a perfect frenzy of fear, and really out of his mind.

"He's mad," said Hixon, breathless with his exertions, "and he committed the crime when he was mad. I see it all now."

"Yes," cried Mother Corn, "and you see it all wrong!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE CLOUDS DISPERSE

WITH regard to the case, as things now were Hixon, according to Mrs. Corn, "saw it all wrong," and it so happened that the public saw it in the same false light—that is, every one believed Dr. Pess to be mad. This view was certainly a reasonable one to take, seeing that he had killed a lady who was not only his best friend, but one from whom he had great expectations. There was absolutely no motive for the committal of the crime, for even if Mrs. Baltin had decided to become reconciled to her nephew the unfortunate doctor gained nothing by murdering her. On the face of it, the act was purposeless. Therefore it was concluded that Pess had strangled the miserable woman in a fit of Baresark fury. In plain English this meant that the man was mad.

The magistrate before whom Pess was brought took this view, and he had every reason to do so, for by this time the doctor was really insane. His servants proved that he often took drugs, and that lately he had been drinking to excess. Then there was the loss of his patients, the loss of his friends and money, together with the shame of being under arrest and the horror of the charge upon which he had been arrested. All these things so worked on the poor man's mind that he lost his reason. When in the court he was alternately sullen and excited; sometimes he wept and sometimes he sang, while on other occasions he assaulted those near him, and laughed wildly, only to mutter incoherently a moment

later. His mental state was inquired into by two doctors, and the result was that poor Pess had to be removed to an asylum as a criminal lunatic. He was hopelessly insane.

At the inquiry Hixon related all that Pess had said in Mother Corn's cottage, but declined to give any opinion as to whether it was the doctor who confessed himself, or something speaking through the doctor. Mrs. Corn gave her evidence, and insisted that Pess was controlled by the evil spirit of the man who owed his death to Mrs. Baltin forty or fifty years before. Naturally no one believed a word she said, and she was considered to be almost as crazy as the prisoner. But her statement that she had seen the deed done was enough to convict the doctor of the crime, and no doubt remained in any one's mind regarding the truth. Pess was guilty and Felk was innocent, so the whole mystery was made plain. But the doctor could not be punished by man, as already he had been punished by God.

The case attracted great attention, and was fully reported in the leading newspapers. People confessed themselves puzzled by the matter. Some agreed with Hixon that Pess had murdered the woman in a fit of madness, as was proved by the fact that he was perfectly crazy at the time of his arrest ; but other people believed that Mother Corn was speaking the truth, and that the wretched man was really obsessed by something evil. As they put it, Pess the consciousness was innocent, but Pess the body was guilty. Letters were written to the newspapers, and the Bible was freely quoted in support of this view. Nevertheless the majority of the public were not to be persuaded that there was anything psychic in the matter. Pess was mad, and, being mad, had committed the crime. Now Pess was shut up in a lunatic asylum, innocent

people were exonerated, and there was no more to be said in the matter. After a time the excitement over the case died away, as it was bound to do, and the general public became interested in something else. In this way the Wichley murder was finally shelved, and every one was heartily glad that the matter was ended.

When Pess was safely put away and the excitement was beginning to cool, Inspector Hixon came over to the village to interview Dolly Banks. That young marplot was desperately angry to find that all her machinations against Chris had failed, and, moreover, she was rather afraid of what she had done. Hixon did not spare her, and she had a very bad quarter of an hour in the little back-parlour behind the shop. Mrs. Banks was present also, and wept nearly all the time, as she had every reason to do, poor soul. As for Dolly, she sat on the sofa with a hard, sulky face, tearless and defiant.

"The best thing you can do," said Hixon, after he had told her in detail what he thought of her conduct, "is to leave the village."

"I shan't, then!"

"Well, I can't force you to do so, but for your own comfort it is better that you should go away for a time. You have behaved shamefully towards Mr. Larcher."

"He promised to marry me," snapped Miss Banks.

"Oh, Dorothy," wailed her mother, "you know that ain't true. I told you long ago, and before all these troubles began, that Master Chris didn't have no idea of making you a lady. You said as you'd force him to do so. Well, you have tried, and a nice kettle of fish you have made of it."

"Oh, shut up!" said Dolly rudely. "I'm tired of your nagging."

Hixon surveyed her handsome, sullen face with a grim smile. "You are a nice young person, I must

say," he said, after a pause. "Only one thing will do you good, and that is physical pain. However, as one cannot thrash a woman, I intend to do my best to make you suffer in another way. If you don't clear out of the village in a week, I shall insist that Mr. Larcher shall prosecute you for defamation of character."

"I don't care," snarled the girl, wincing a little and turning white. "Jem will look after me."

Here an unexpected interruption occurred, for just as if he had heard his name mentioned and had answered to the summons Trap entered the room from the shop. The big man looked lowering and savage, not at Hixon, as might have been supposed, but at his young lady. Dolly, with feminine cleverness, at once began to disarm him by crying, and rose to throw herself on his breast.

"Oh, Jem dear," she cried, sobbing bitterly, "this beastly policeman is insulting me, though I've done nothing wrong."

Jem pushed her away so violently that she fell back on the sofa. "You've done nothing wrong, ain't you?" shouted the big man furiously. "Why, you ain't done nothing right, you slut! There's a crowd of folk in the street wondering if this gent's going to run you in. I heard as a uniform had entered your shop, and come on here to see what's up."

"Oh," said Hixon coolly, "do you propose to defend her?"

"Not me!" said Trap, in disgust. "I wouldn't dirty my fingers with her."

Mrs. Banks fired up like a defiant rabbit. "How dare you come here to insult me and my daughter?" she squeaked tearfully.

"I ain't insulting you," growled Jem wrathfully. "I ain't got nothing to do with you, bad as is the

bringing-up as you've given your gel. I just come to say as I've chucked her."

"Chucked me?" screamed Dolly "Why, I can get fifty better men nor you!"

"Not in Wichley. There ain't a man as 'ud touch you 'cept as he might to duck you in the pond. I ain't got nothing more to do with you. See?"

"See?" Dolly was on her feet by this time. "Yes, I see as you're a poor silly Billy who has been scolded by your old hag of a grandmother into throwing me over. She never liked me. She's afraid of me."

"She's not afraid of you, and don't you call Gran names," retorted Jem, with a black look. "But Master Chris stood up to me like a man and whipped me, which few can do. I told you when you lied about him as I'd have no more of such goings-on; but you were at it again along with that crazy old Pess. Now I've done with you, and the whole village is against you. I've just got to say the word to them outside and you'll be ducked."

"Oh, Jem, Jem," wailed Mrs. Banks, in terror "don't, don't!" And she wept, while Dolly, with a white, set face as hard as iron, said nothing; but if looks could have killed, Trap would then and there have dropped dead on the floor.

"That's enough, my man," said Hixon sharply. "I'm here to preserve law and order, and there must be no talking of ducking."

"She deserves it," said Jem sullenly.

"I agree with you there. All the same, she's a woman, and as such must be protected. But I think," he added, turning sharply on Dolly, "that you will see the advisability of leaving this village."

"And if I don't?" questioned Dolly, her nostrils dilating, for she had plenty of courage, and was rather enraged than frightened.

"If you don't I shall ask Mr. Larcher to bring a charge of criminal libel against you," said the inspector smoothly.

"And if you don't," threatened Jem, who would not be suppressed, "we'll duck you as soon as the police is away."

"Stop it!" commanded Hixon sternly. "None of that," whereat Jem became silent, but his face showed that he meant what he said. "I really think," he continued, and after a pause, "that you had better pack up a few clothes and let me take you to the railway station. I have my motor-car outside. If you don't come with me I can't promise you protection, as every one is evidently disgusted with your goings-on. Come, make up your mind."

"Oh, Dolly dear," wept Mrs. Banks, who was afraid lest her shop should be wrecked notwithstanding the presence of the inspector, "you'd better go to your aunt at Camberwell, my very own sister. She'll look after you, and I daresay a handsome girl like you can get a post in a London shop."

"I'd string her up to a lamp-post if I'd my way," growled Jem viciously.

Dolly, courageous as she was, had to give way. "I'm going," she announced, standing up, "not because I'm afraid, but because I won't have anything to do with the dirty creatures who live in this place. You wait here, Mr. Hixon, and I'll get a few things together."

She went upstairs to her bedroom, while Jem, in his rough way, consoled Mrs. Banks, and Hixon smoked a cigarette. "Don't take on," said Jem, patting the old woman's shoulder. "She ain't worth one tear, let alone a dozen. Dolly's a bad lot, and 'ud sell you and every one else to get her own way. You stay on here with Bob to look arter the shop, and things will go on

as usual. No one has a word to say against you. Let her go, and you're all right."

"I'm glad as her poor father as was so fashionable didn't live to see this day," wept Mrs. Banks. "It's like the French Revolution, it is. To see my own child driven from home ain't what I'd expect as due to me."

Jem grunted, and said no more, while Hixon also held his peace. In a short space of time, which showed that she was more frightened than she would admit, Dolly came down the stairs dressed very smartly and carrying a small portmanteau. With a defiant look she informed Hixon that she was ready, and then submitted to be wept over by her mother. She was heartless to the end.

"There, that's enough fuss," she said, getting away from the maternal arms. "As to you, Jem, I'll be even with you some day."

"Show your face again here and I'll not answer for what we'll do," growled Jem, who was angered by her insolence. "You hear 'em?"

There was, indeed, an ominous murmur in the street, which increased to a roar when Dolly issued out of the shop on Hixon's arm. She stepped hastily into the motor-car, and the inspector followed, while Jem started the machine. Every one was disgusted with Dolly's lies and Dolly's vanity, which had caused her to tell the lies, and with Dolly's whole behaviour. The men swore and the women screamed as the motor-car moved slowly through the crowd, gathering speed as the people scattered right and left. Fists were shaken, a few missiles were thrown, and there is no doubt that but for the presence of the inspector Dolly would have been torn from the car by the angry mob. Now she was really frightened and cowed, shrinking down to make herself as small as possible. In this

public way did her sins come home to her, and she passed out of the village, never to return, amidst the curses of every one. As Dolly had sown so was she reaping. All the same, when beyond Wichley she declared that she had been very badly treated, and gave herself the airs of a martyr.

"And I hope Chris will be miserable with that ugly girl he's married," said Dolly viciously.

"Don't you bother your head," retorted Hixon coolly. "Mr. Larcher and his *beautiful* wife will be as happy as the day's long, while you'll be as miserable as the devil. And you deserve to be. Here, no words! This is the railway station. Get out and let me see the last of you."

Dolly got out, Dolly entered the station, and Dolly vanished into the unknown of London. Whether she went to her aunt in Camberwell no one ever knew, as no letters were received, and Mrs. Banks wrote in vain for tidings. Dolly simply vanished, and nothing more was ever heard of her. And it must be confessed that after the first outburst of grief at Dolly's disgraceful departure Mrs. Banks was much happier for her absence. Along with Bob she managed the shop, and did good business, as no one wished to visit the sins of the child on the parent. As to Dolly, her name was never mentioned; but the poor mother always consoled herself with the idea that her handsome girl would be sure to fall on her feet. This was extremely probable, as Dolly was a perfectly heartless person who invariably looked after number one.

In due time other and more important events took place. Felk and his accomplice, Walters, were cleared of the charge of murder, but were condemned to a long term of penal servitude for the burglaries. These they had committed not only in Wichley, but in other places, and once the police were on their track many

such charges were brought against them. So Chris was rid at once both of his rival and of Dolly, who had troubled him so much. The clouds round him and round Alice dispersed, as Miss Hesmond said they would, and Chris came to tell the old maid that Dene had given his consent to an immediate marriage.

"I thought he would," said Miss Hesmond, greatly pleased. "He is wise to do so, Chris, as, after all, he has made a great fool of himself."

"He admits that. Felk took him in completely. Tell me what made you suspect Felk and set the police on his track?"

"I was told so by One who guides me, Chris. But I don't expect you to believe that."

"Well, I don't know," answered the young man musingly. "It seems to me that, after all, there must be something in your belief. Hixon told me that his hair stood on end when he was present at the interview in Mother Corn's cottage."

"The interview with Simon Grain? Yes, Simon Grain was there right enough."

"You believe, then, that the spirit of a dead man came back to revenge himself on the woman who had driven him to suicide?"

"Yes, I believe that firmly. And he *did* revenge himself terribly."

"Well, let us take what you say as gospel truth," argued Chris, looking perplexed. "Isn't it rather hard that Pess should be punished for what he never did?"

"Pess brought the punishment on himself," said the old maid unhesitatingly. "He was warned solemnly by me not to tamper with the Unseen, as he was not strong enough or good enough to do so. Chris, in His great goodness, God has placed a veil between this world and the next, else humanity would be more

tormented by its own foolishness than it already is. On the Other Side are many evil things created by the evil thoughts of men, and there are also many evil people who have passed over. Those who lift the veil are unable to drop it again, and, therefore, lay themselves open to the intrusion of evil."

"Why not intrusion of good?"

"Because the thoughts of man at this stage of evolution are mostly evil. If one thinks purely and lives cleanly and trusts wholly in the Great Master Christ, then one is safe. But evil thoughts attract evil; and if the veil is lifted from sheer curiosity, or from a desire to get the better of one's fellow creatures, then evil comes through. Pess surrendered his body as a medium to the use of the spirits, and Simon Grain took advantage of his opportunity. Do not think that Pess has been treated unjustly by God, Chris. Pess had free-will, as we all have, and if we elect to do evil rather than good we must abide by our choice. As Pess has sown so has he reaped."

"Like Dolly."

"Precisely. She behaved badly, and has met with her reward. Never forget, Chris, that whatever we do we must pay for, and that if we put out a cause we produce an effect which must be worked out to the bitter end. No tears, no sorrow, no remorse, can do away with what we bring on ourselves. Only true repentance will bring the Great Master to the sinner's aid. And, alas, true repentance comes only from bitter experience, so the pain has to be endured."

"It is all very puzzling," said Larcher, with a sigh.

"To you, because you have not yet arrived at that stage when you wish to know the Truth. It is the Truth that makes us free, Chris; and when we wish to know it, the Truth, or so much of it as we can

understand, is told to us. I am not at all puzzled by the problems of life. I understand much, and I am learning to understand more. Therefore in the midst of terrors I am calm, because I am sure, as St. Paul says, that 'All things work together for good.' "

"I can't see it."

"Don't try to see it, my dear boy," said Miss Hesmond, patting him on the back kindly. "Later on we can talk about these things. At present all you have to do is to marry Alice and take a pleasant trip abroad. When you return all things will be smooth. And you must forgive the villagers for their wrong suspicions, Chris. They have repented, and have made amends by the way in which they turned Dolly Banks out of the village. Poor girl," sighed Miss Hesmond, "she has much to learn."

"Well, I hope she'll not come back here to learn it," returned Chris with emphasis. "I've had enough of her. Well, I am to marry Alice in a week, as I told you, and then we will start for France. Sarah Jundy is to have charge of the Manor House in the meantime."

"She is better, then?"

"Oh, yes. Now that everything is settled in this wonderful way Sarah is as brisk as a bee and as bright as a cricket. After her long slavery to my poor misguided aunt she looks forward to having a happy old age. I owe much to Sarah and," added Chris emphatically, "to Hixon."

Miss Hesmond nodded. "I like Mr. Hixon," she said pleasantly. "While you and Alice are away I am going up to Yorkshire to stay with his mother, who was my school friend. Have you told Mr. Hixon that you are to be married so soon?"

"No; I have only just been told myself by Mr. Dene

But I shall drive over and tell Hixon when I ask him to be my best man. You shall be the bridesmaid."

"Well, I am quite willing. Because of your aunt's death the wedding is bound to be a quiet one—that is, if the villagers will allow it to be so."

But the villagers refused to allow a quiet wedding. Hixon was the best man, and Miss Hesmond acted as the one bridesmaid, old as she was. Mr. Dene graciously married the young couple, and gave them his blessing. Now that he saw how very, very foolishly he had behaved he made all amends to Chris, and admired him as much as he had formerly disliked him. There was every chance that he would prove a pattern father-in-law, and, as the Aaron of the village, would work amicably with Chris, who was the Moses. As to the villagers, they crowded the church and the churchyard, and were much excited by the marriage of their popular young squire. Sarah Jundy, in a wonderful dress, more gaudy than the plumage of a parrot, was the most excited of all, and had to be led out of the church by Mother Corn. That wonderful old woman wore the blue velvet gown, and had discarded the linen sun-bonnet and tartan shawl for a brilliant red cloak and for a large picture-hat bristling with feathers. *She* also rejoiced that the clouds round the young couple had dispersed, and rebuked Sarah Jundy for weeping.

"I can't—can't—help—it," sobbed Sarah, who was seated on a flat tombstone, looking rather like a brilliant tropical bird. "To see them dears makes me so joyful as only tears will relieve my feelings. I nussed him, bless him, and many a time I've had her on my knee. I can depart in peace now, bless 'em."

"There ain't no need for you to depart, deary," said Mother Corn soothingly. "I don't see what's the use of getting out of this world into the next when things

are happy-like. Didn't I say as trouble was about 'em, and didn't it come tremenjous? Now the clouds hev broke, and the sun's cheering 'em."

"There won't be no more clouds, I do hope," remarked Mrs. Jundy rather tremulously. "They've had enough of sorrer."

"The clouds hev gone," proclaimed Mother Corn in deep, commanding tones. "All is bright before them, and will be bright until the end of their days on this earth do come. Children they shall hev, and wealth and happiness and peace. The poor shall bless them, and the sorrerful shall praise them. What they hev sowed in sorrer they shall reap in joy, Sarah Jundy. So don't you cry when the Lord is blessing them as He did Jacob and Isaac and Abraham."

Sarah bowed her head in thankfulness, and closed her eyes the better to behold the time when a child of Chris and Alice would be seated on her knee. But she opened them immediately again as the full thunder of the Wedding March struck on her ears. Bride and bridegroom issued from the church to the pealing of the organ and the clashing of the bells. On every side pressed the villagers, cheering, with hats and handkerchiefs in the air, while the children scattered flowers before the young couple. A quiet wedding indeed! The villagers were not going to have that, if it could be helped.

After the wedding breakfast at the vicarage Mr. and Mrs. Larcher started in a motor-car for their wedding tour. They were driving straight to Charing Cross to take the train to Dover and the boat to France. Sarah clasped her dear boy to her breast, weeping her farewells; Mr. Dene blessed the outgoing of the young couple, while Hixon and Miss Hesmond escorted them to the motor-car. The old maid's eyes were glittering with joyful tears, but she suppressed her emotion

wonderfully, and saw with happy smiles the motor-car moving away. Mother Corn threw an old shoe after the motor-car for luck, and the machine buzzed through the village amid cheering crowds.

"It's like a royal reception, Alice," said Larcher, with a laugh, as he took off his hat again and again.

"I think they are all sorry that they suspected you for a moment," said Mrs. Larcher. "They are trying to make amends."

"They have succeeded, dear. I quite forgive them for their unjust suspicions, as, after all, Dolly Banks made out a very black case against me."

"Oh, don't talk of that girl!" said Alice, with a shudder.

"Then don't you talk of the case at all. You started it. Alice, my darling, we have had a bad time, and the last few months have been desperately trying. So let us agree to forget everything unpleasant and enjoy ourselves."

"But poor Dr. Pess and poor Mr. Felk——"

"One is in a lunatic asylum and the other in prison," said Chris a trifle sadly, "and I am sorry for them, although they did not behave well. However, we must think, as Miss Hesmond does, that everything is for the best. Being sorry won't help them, and will only make us miserable. And, after all, Pess did not commit the crime."

"Do you believe that?" asked Alice in an awed whisper.

"Yes. It was the Other Person who murdered my poor aunt."

"Simon Grain?"

"Exactly. He is the Other Person, and came back to work his wicked will. Only because Pess tampered with the Unseen did Simon Grain manage to do what

he did do. Now there is the explanation, so let us talk no more of the matter."

"No." Alice nestled closer to her husband. "We must put all the past behind us, and look forward to a bright future."

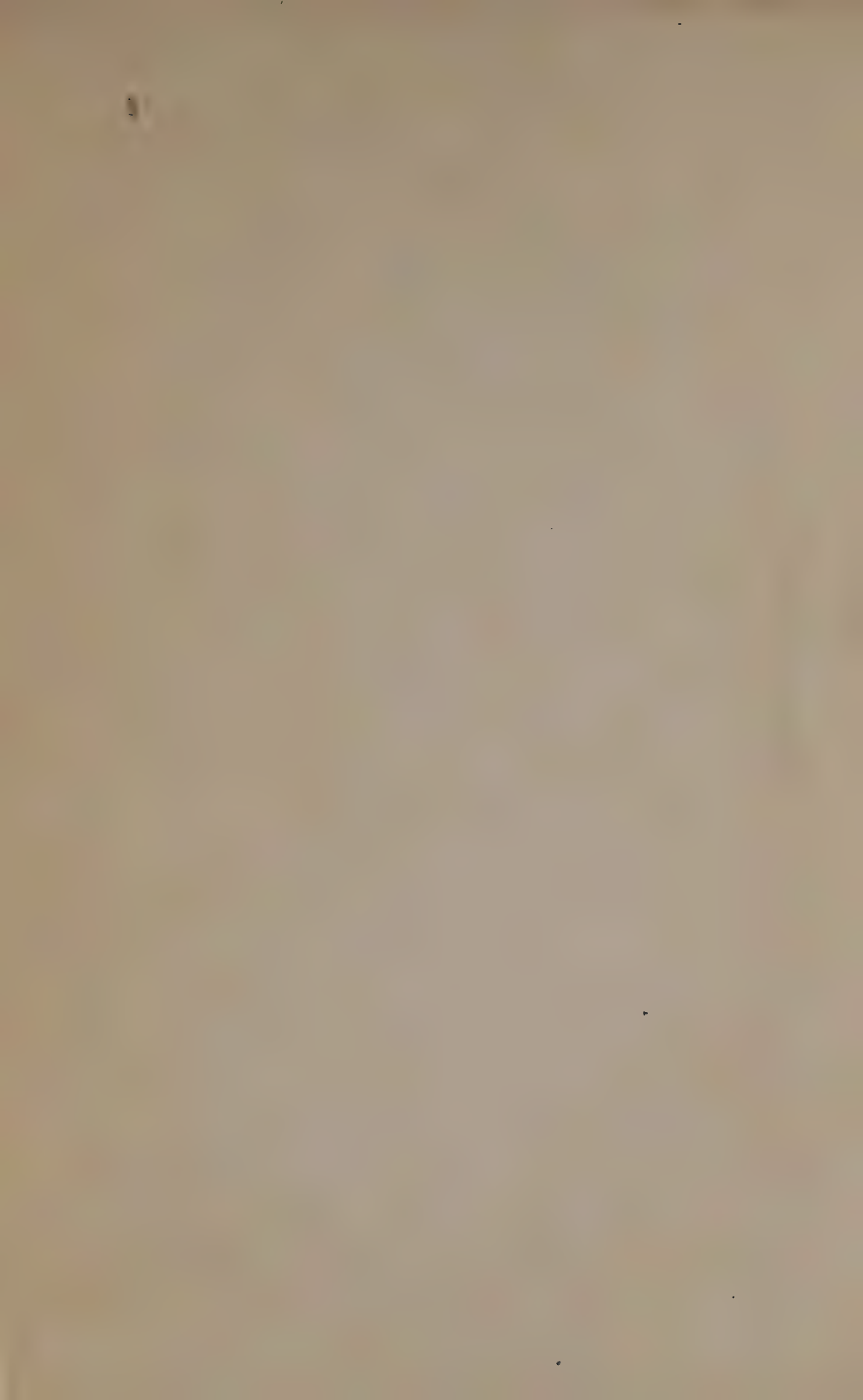
"To as bright a future as the sky," said Chris, pointing to the brilliant sun shining in the cloudless blue firmament. "See what a good omen, dearest."

He held her in his strong arms, he kissed her and fondled her, and the motor-car swung forward mile after mile towards the great city, bearing them to joy and peace and happiness and to a useful future of work of others.

"God is very good," murmured Chris in the fullness of his joy, and kissed his wife, once, thrice, and again.

THE END

Printed by the
Southampton Times Company Ltd.
70 Above Bar





datacolor

